THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE

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Those two famous, fearless and fantastic secret agents give you the kind of action that made you cry ***U.N.C.L.E.!***

THE ELECTRONIC FRANKENSTEIN AFFAIR

A NEW Complete Novel by

ROBERT HART DAVIS

THE ELECTRONIC FRANKENSTEIN AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

Silent, malevolent, the Gobi guarded its grim secret, as Solo and Illya fought against time and THRUSH to find the demon which could read men's very thoughts—and kill without a trace!

PROLOGUE—THE EXECUTIONERS

THE TWO U.N.C.L.E. agents were wearing fleece-lined greatcoats, fur mittens and heavy leather boots. But only bulky spacesuits could have insulated them against the icy wind that was blowing cold upon them from a cold winter sea, chilling them to the bone.

It came sweeping up out of the gray Atlantic in gusts of almost hurricane force, raising flurries of snow and making the bleak inhospitality of the Newfoundland Banks in midwinter very hard to endure.

They were large, sturdily built men. But the gigantic rock structures which ran parallel with the headland on its landward side made them seem grotesquely out of proportion in this terrain so rugged it would have dwarfed a twelve-foot giant. They both wore upon their left wrists THRUSH cell identification bracelets bearing initials which their real names—Bruce Huntley and Walter Rivers—completely belied. And they both knew that if a whisper of that deception came to the ears of THRUSH they would be in the deadliest kind of danger.

A few feet from where they were standing, a narrow path descended the cliff wall to a mile wide stretch of beach, strewn with the wreckage of an Atlantic gale that had reached its peak two days earlier and hadn't quite blown itself out.

Several large brown rats with wetly glistening coats had made their home amidst the wreckage carried shoreward by an earlier storm and were running back and forth across the sand, exploring the new wreckage with starved eagerness.

Huntley was the first to break the silence. They were miles from the nearest human habitation. But two weeks of constant undercover vigilance inside the stone walls of a THRUSH project had made him super-cautious and he kept his voice lowered from force of habit, speaking just loud enough to make himself heard above the crash of the waves.

"We should be seeing the submarine any minute now," he said. "It would be a mistake to start worrying before the commander comes ashore. What makes you think they've even begun to suspect us?"

Rivers lowered the powerful binocular telescope he had been keeping steadily trained on the sea, and stared at his companion for an instant before replying.

"I don't know, exactly," he said. "It would be misleading to call it a hunch; it's far too nebulous. It's just that—well, when everything goes too well it's hard to shake off the feeling that you may be walking into a trap."

"I've had that feeling myself at times," Huntley confessed. "But you can't say we haven't taken every precaution. No messages exchanged, even in code. No attempt to communicate with New York. We've never allowed ourselves to forget there could be— and probably are—electronic eavesdropping devices behind every wall and corridor turn throughout the entire project."

The gusts of wind that were sweeping the headland seemed suddenly to increase in violence. Only a thin coating of snow covered the frozen soil at the cliff's edge, and no more snow was descending. But there were thin splinters of sleet in the air, as cheek-stinging as chilblains.

Huntley raised his voice as he went on, no longer giving a thought to the caution which their distance from the THRUSH project had made wholly unnecessary.

"We breathe and our every bronchial murmur becomes a matter of record. We scrawl a few words on a slip of paper—which we've been careful not to do, of course—and an invisible photo cell scanning device reproduces the message, along with our palm prints."

"You don't have to blueprint it for me," Rivers said. "The reports we've been getting concerning THRUSH'S progress in protective bugging equipment in recent months has given Waverley some bad moments. They've matched us device for device, probably because we've been pressing them so hard we've given them no choice. But granting all that, what does just recognizing the danger prove? We've stayed alert to it, sure. But one small slip—"

"I can't believe we've made any," Huntley said with conviction. "We've followed instructions too scrupulously. Touch nothing, investigate nothing beyond what we came here to find out. They would never have entrusted us with a mission as important as this if they had the remotest suspicion we're U.N.C.L.E. undercover operatives."

The waves had been making a hollow, drumming sound as they crashed against the cliff wall. The two herring gulls had seemed completely unaffected by the sound. But suddenly a kind of panic came upon them, and they went flapping seaward, as if a different kind of sound, inaudible to human ears, had alerted them to danger and made the shoreline seem unsafe.

Huntley stared at them in puzzlement as their mad, erratic flight carried them a mile from shore, then continued with his attempt to diminish his companion's entirely human forebodings.

"If they suspected us I'm quite sure we'd know by now," he said, as if he felt the point needed to be stressed. "You can usually tell when you're under surveillance."

"But not always," Rivers said.

Huntley tightened his lips, and looked at the other sharply. "Something is bugging you," he said. "Why don't you get it off your chest?"

"All right, I will," Rivers said. "Consider first what we've found out. In two or three more days, at most, THRUSH will have ready a twenty-pound detonating device that can destroy all underwater life within a radius of fifty or sixty miles. It's the deadliest midget torpedo-like weapon ever developed."

He paused an instant to stare down at the rats on the beach far below. "They think we're just bench-level technicians," he went on, staring seaward again. "Doesn't it seem strange to you that we should have been given the assignment of contacting the submarine that's to give the detonator a test run? It's more of a job for a top echelon operative."

Huntley shook his head. "I don't think so," he said. "You're forgetting that THRUSH trusts no one. Not even a sub-commander is exempt. And they want a simple, honest, first-hand report, precisely the kind of report two bench-level technicians would be most likely to return with. It's a kind of security check. It would take an hour to transmit what we're delivering into his hands on microfilm, and they know exactly how proficient U.N.C.L.E. is in cracking messages in code."

"I hope you're right," Rivers said. "For all we know the commander may have been warned to watch us like a hawk. That could be the key as to why we're here. They may be hoping we'll do or say something that will confirm what they've begun to suspect."

"If they were even slightly suspicious they'd be making plans for our burial," Huntley said. "You don't send a man on an eight-mile journey to blow him apart when you can dispose of him much more efficiently on a twenty-foot target range."

"But suppose they're not quite sure. Suppose—"

"There would be simpler ways of making sure than sending us on a mission this vital," Huntley said. "They'd never choose such a complicated, round-about way of handling it on the off-chance we may make some slip—"

Suddenly Rivers stiffened. He lowered his binoculars for an instant, inspected the twin lenses quickly to make sure they were not misted over,

and returned the instrument to his eyes. For a full minute he continued to stare seaward, his face set in harsh lines. Then his hand went out and fastened on Huntley's arm.

"Follow that deep-channel gray streak to where it turns almost black," he said. "The periscope's just a little to the left of a patch of choppy waves, it's moving fast."

Huntley nodded and realigned his binoculars without saying a word. His features remained impassive. But his posture matched that of Rivers in its stock-still alertness.

No further word was spoken until Rivers, as if irked by the other's silence, asked abruptly: "Don't you see it? It should be easy enough to make out. It's almost stationary now and the sea around it is breaking into foam."

"Yes, I see it," Huntley said. "But I thought for a minute it might be a shark. A fin cutting through the water would have pretty much the same look—"

"That wouldn't be so wide of the mark," Rivers said. "In about three more minutes we'll be seeing the gray dorsal fins of an all-metal killer shark that's probably more native to these waters than THRUSH would like anyone—least of all, U.NC.L.E.—to suspect."

"How many men do you suppose they'll put ashore?" the other asked. "Two—a half-dozen? There's very little likelihood that the commander will arrive on the beach alone."

He stopped speaking abruptly, the rigidity of his posture becoming more pronounced again. The submarine was emerging into view amidst a white swirl of foam. Not even the dull overcast could dim the gleam of a conning tower awash with spray as it continued to surface, swaying and rocking a little.

In utter silence the two men on the headland watched the hatch arise and several crew members leap out. They watched a hurrying to and fro, and the putting off from the long gray undersea craft of a small boat which

contained four men, wearing what looked like THRUSH uniforms of officer rank.

FIVE MINUTES later the boat was drawing up at the beach and in all that time neither Huntley nor Rivers had exchanged a word, so intent had they been on watching a possible threat to their very survival materializing out of the sea.

"Well, this is it," Huntley said, his voice so sharply decisive it seemed to shatter the stillness like a pistol shot. "We may as well meet them on the beach."

Descending the narrow cliffside path against the fierce gusts of wind took them a full minute. The four officers had just finished beaching the boat when they reached the frozen sand, and only one of them had started to move cliffward.

He was a tall, gaunt man with a heavily lined face and he walked with a slight stoop and a faint suggestion of weariness. But there was something authoritative in his darkly gleaming eyes and the stern set of his features that left Huntley and Rivers in little doubt as to his command status.

The instant he saw Huntley and Rivers he raised his right arm in a gesture of recognition. It was not a greeting. There was no change of expression on his face, nothing to suggest that he was pleased to see them, or even that their appearance on the beach had lifted a small burden from his shoulders by making a search for them unnecessary.

He turned and gestured toward the other three officers and stood waiting for them to join him with out advancing further.

Then, walking four abreast, the men from the sea approached Huntley and Rivers and halted directly in front of them.

The commander was wearing steel-rimmed spectacles and there was a hard glint in his pupils which the thick lenses seemed to magnify. Even at a distance of seven feet the coldness of his gaze was unmistakable.

"I am Commander Ulrich," he said. "And these gentlemen are my senior and junior officers. You are Thomas Drake and Melvin Kendall?"

The use of their THRUSH cell names, which corresponded with the initials on their identity bracelet, would not have remotely suggested that their disguise had been penetrated if Commander Ulrich's voice had not been tinged with mockery. The mockery was as pronounced as the coldness of his gaze, and it caused Huntley to hesitate a moment before replying.

Rivers had been content simply to nod, but a look of relief came into his eyes when Huntley answered the question with surprising firmness.

"Yes," he said. "We have some microfilm instructions to turn over to you. We were told—"

"What were you told, precisely?" Ulrich asked, a deceptive mildness coming into his voice.

"That the submarine would surface and you would come ashore between two and two-thirty. We were instructed to return to the project if you did not arrive by three, at the latest."

"Excellent," Commander Ulrich said. "You are very good at obeying orders —up to a point. But then you committed an unforgivable blunder. You talked about the precautions you'd taken to avoid exposure. I can quote your exact words, spoken less than twenty minutes ago: 'We've taken every precaution. No messages exchanged, even in code. No attempt to communicate with New York.'

"A great deal more, of course. But need I repeat everything you said? It would only delay your execution by a few minutes and for a condemned man a few minutes can mean an eternity of torment. I'm sure you would not wish to delay what has become inevitable."

Huntley and Rivers had both taken a quick step backwards, pallor overspreading their features. It was as if so strong a feeling of unreality had come upon them that speech bad become impossible, for when their lips

opened and closed the silence which had followed the commander's accusation remained unbroken.

"I know," Ulrich said, his voice once more tinged with derision. "It seems unbelievable, doesn't it? We were under the sea and you were standing on the cliff overheard, seven miles from the project. No possibility of being overheard, eh? Well—you were. And not by human ears until we picked up the warning."

His voice thickened, became choked with sudden rage. "To think that THRUSH had not the faintest suspicion that you might be U.N.C.L.E. agents! The unit's surveillance was just a precaution. If you had remained silent—"

Commander Ulrich turned abruptly and made a quick gesture with his right hand. The three other officers drew their weapons so swiftly that the long-muzzled pistols in their hands were leveled and aimed before the two U.N.C.L.E. agents could take another step backwards.

Leaping backwards or aside could not have saved them and Huntley seemed to realize that an instant before the first blast came, for there swept into his eyes a look of resignation terrible in its bleak hopelessness.

He straightened nevertheless, facing death with his shoulders squared, and although the two bullets that tore through his chest sent him spinning back toward the cliff wall, he did not slump until be struck a jagged edge of rock with his arms outflung.

Why the three officers did not fire simultaneously, blasting away at both men until they both dropped remained their own secret. But it was not too difficult to fathom. Efficiency in an execution could be impaired that way. Bullet riddled bodies had a way of recoiling and rebounding and random firing, even at almost pointblank range, could leave an uncertainty in the mind until the smoke cleared.

That unconscious preference for accuracy and neatness in killing gave Rivers a few more minutes of life. Before the gun in the hand of the officer on Commander Ulrich's right came level with his head he flung himself

face downward in the sand, jerking himself backwards just as quickly without raising his head.

The gun that had been aimed at his head wavered a little as the officer lowered it and before he could bring it into alignment again with so flattened a target River's hand had whipped under his greatcoat and emerged with a tiny explosive pellet the size of a fountain pen.

He hurled it straight at the four men from the sea and the target he might have made was obliterated by the smoke from a blast that lighted up the entire beach, completely dispelling the gray over cast.

When the smoke cleared Commander Ulrich was lying stretched out at full length on a patch of blood-reddened sand, his head blown off. The officer who hadn't succeeded in exploding his gun at all was swaying back and forth on his knees, his hands clutching his stomach as if the flood of red that was oozing between his fingers was running a race with the glaze that was creeping across his eyes, and winning at a terrible cost in pain.

The third officer had turned and was hobbling toward the surfline and the beached boat, the entire back of his head so charred by the blast that it seemed incredible that he could hobble at all.

But the fourth officer had been injured only slightly, and his freakish luck in having escaped the full force of the blast had brought a look of grim exultation into his eyes. He stood very still, taking careful aim at Rivers as he arose to his full height and Rivers was too shaken by the concussion which had followed the blast to realize how great was his peril until the gun went off.

The bullet ripped the flesh of his right shoulder, leaving a jagged gash. The pain was agonizing for an instant. But it did not prevent him from swinging about and running with his shoulders lowered toward the cliff wall, zigzagging a little to make it less likely that the bullets he knew would follow quickly to find lodgment in his brain or heart.

He was a third of the way up the cliff wall when the narrow path in front of him erupted in a cloud of dust and the roar of the pursuing officer's fun

made his ears ring. But the second shot was a clean miss, and he was at the top of the cliff before the third blast came.

He looked down and saw the long-muzzled pistol flame an instant before something that felt like a solid wall of metal struck him full in the chest.

He took a tottering step forward, bent double and went spinning over the edge of the cliff, his body turning over and over in the air until it landed with a crash on below.

The THRUSH officer whose role of executioner had been successfully completed stood for an instant twenty feet from the summit of the cliff, and returned his still smoking pistol to its holster beneath his right shoulder, a cold smile playing over his distorted features.

Then he descended the path to the beach, stood for a moment staring down at the crumpled body of Huntley and lingered for a moment longer on the crushed and battered remains of the U.N.C.L.E. agent his own accuracy of aim had brought low.

The officer who had gone hobbling toward the boat had some how managed to draw it out into the surf and was standing knee deep in swirling foam, holding fast to the rail and swaying like a drunken man.

The face of the successful executioner convulsed with what could only have been rage. "Coward, simpleton, fool," he muttered, between clenched teeth. "He leaves it all to me and getting what's left of the commander into that boat is not going to be easy. If he lets go of the rail—"

There were two dead THRUSH officers on the beach now. But the one who had tried in vain to stem the flow of blood that had widened about him like a rock pool fringed with scarlet sea anemones he ignored, as if for a responsible THRUSH officer to get himself killed, however unavoidably, made him contemptible in a successful executioner's eyes.

That the commander was equally an object of contempt was evident in the rough way he was lifted up, dragged across the beach and tumbled, minus his head, into the swaying boat's stern.

A moment later the boat was moving out across the sea toward the waiting THRUSH submarine.

ONE

NEW YORK BRIEFING

NAPOLEON SOLO and Illya Kuryakin were frowning heavily when they walked into the big, brightly lighted room crowded with electronic equipment where the New York Control Unit of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement conducted its operations.

The quiet brownstone on the East Side of New York, a short distance from the East River, possessed an invaluable defensive protection in just the constant ebb and flow of Manhattan's daily life in eddies around it.

Passing cars, a little old lady stopping to chat with a neighbor, a diplomat with a brief case hurrying in the direction of the United Nations Building a few blocks away were all assets. Who would suspect that behind so unpretentious a false front one of the most powerful crime-fighting organizations on earth functioned around the clock, receiving communications and issuing orders global in scope?

Sometimes it worried Solo just a little, if only because so vast a complex of assembled technology, and the activities of so many men of exceptional brilliance might lead to over-confidence and a prematurely-timed confrontation with THRUSH in a gigantic struggle that could have world-destroying consequences.

Someday such a risk might have to be taken, the fateful pawn tossed down in bold challenge, for THRUSH could not be allowed to wreck civilization by abandoning all concern for its own survival in its mad grasp for power.

So far THRUSH had come close to waging such a struggle, for many of the battles it had lost to U.N.C.L.E. in the past had been potentially world-destructive. But a ways that final stage of suicidal madness had been

averted, and THRUSH had drawn back from a gamble with destiny in which there could be no victor. Like some great beast, snarling and grievously wounded, it had retreated into jungle shadows to recoup its strength for another try.

Napoleon Solo had supreme confidence in the sobriety and good sense of the organization he served as Chief Enforcement Officer, Section II. He had supreme confidence as well in the decisions of Alexander Waverly, the director of U.N.C.L.E.'S New York headquarters.

But now, as he strode into the presence of that bushy-browed, tweedily attired and remarkably self-possessed man of just past middle-age, he was sharing Illya Kuryakin's vexation concerning something that had happened to them the night before.

It was a minor vexation and they did not think it would interest Waverly. But somehow they found that shrugging it off in completely casual fashion was proving difficult. It concerned a dinner date with a blonde and a brunette who had behaved outrageously.

First the blonde had seemed more drawn to Solo and had then decided that she liked Kuryakin better, and the brunette had abandoned Illya in favor of Solo. That would have been all right, because the two young ladies had been almost equally attractive. But later, on leaving the restaurant, they had both changed their minds again.

"There's something I guess we just have to accept," Solo was saying. "It's hard for a woman to stay attached to just one man when an evening is long and complicated and there are unusual men on hand to make a choice difficult."

"You're probably right. We really ought to forget it." Illya was attempting to smile, but he looked the opposite of happy.

Before they could carry the conversation further they had passed through the door of the brightly lighted research facility and electronic communications room and Waverly was coming forward to greet them.

There were those who thought of Waverly as sedate and scholarly and others who saw him as "a tough old bird" with a wrinkle-seamed face who could probably hold his own with a much younger man in hand-to-hand combat. Few men, indeed, saw precisely the same Waverly, for his expression alone could change with great rapidity, particularly when he was under the stress of strong emotion.

That he was under such stress now was instantly apparent to both Napoleon Solo and Kuryakin. But though his eyes glittered with excitement nothing could completely shatter the control which he had over his emotions.

"There's something I want you to see," he said. "We can talk afterwards. Sit down over there and make yourselves comfortable. You won't stay relaxed for long, I can promise you."

He gestured toward a row of five metal-backed chairs facing a large unlighted screen, a few feet in front of a massive projection instrument, which was connected with a wall socket by ten feet of cable-like wiring as thick as a man's wrist.

Solo walked to the five chairs and sat down on the one nearest the door. Illya hesitated an instant, as if were about to ask Mr. Waverly a question.

"Just be seated please, Mr. Kuryakin," Waverly said, putting an end to Illya's indecision. He chose the chair next to Solo, crossed his legs and waited, a puzzled frown on his face.

Waverly was seldom quite so abrupt, and it suggested to both men that the strain under which he appeared to be laboring was indeed unusual.

He dug a pipe with a bulldog bowl from his pocket, and took his time in filling it with tobacco and lighting it. Then he strode to the projector and fussed with the instrument for a moment, as if just turning it on was proving more of an ordeal than he had anticipated and he wished to postpone it as long as possible.

"The light switch, Mr. Solo," he said. "Take care of it, please. The room must be in darkness."

Solo nodded and without getting up he leaned sideways and pressed a button that plunged the room in total darkness. There was a faint click, and the screen lighted up be fore the darkness could become oppressive.

"What you are about to see," Waverly said, "is a re-run of an audio-visual telecast picked up from God knows what freakish source by one of our range-finding transmission circuits. A code-breaking circuit, although this particular telecast is not in code, visually or otherwise. Apparently THRUSH did not think it could be picked up. If they had, you can be sure it would have come through scrambled."

"But why should THRUSH think that?" Solo asked. "Was it different from an ordinary telecast?"

"In some respects it was," Waverly said. "The frequencies are unusual, although not beyond the range of our highly specialized pickup circuit. Also —and this is most important—we've determined, from painstaking angle-analysis, that it could not have been made by a recording instrument in the immediate vicinity of what you are about to see taking place on the screen. It could only have been made from a very great distance."

"You mean—by a telescopic lens and sound apparatus?"

"Perhaps. But even that seems to be ruled out, in a way, by other peculiarities revealed by the analysis. It is a most baffling telecast. It may not have even been transmitted by THRUSH from the site of the recording to the Newfoundland project for purposes of documentation. It's as if some invisible recording source, such as a photo-sensitized cloud high in the sky had audio-visually picked up and transmitted what was taking place on the beach far below."

"The Newfoundland Project!"

Solo said. "I might have guessed it. The long silence of Huntley and Rivers —"

"Huntley's body was found by a trawler two days ago, floating in the sea some thirty miles south of the headland which is the nearest point of land

on the map which I've been consulting," said Waverly. "The headland is about eight miles east of the THRUSH project. You ate now going to see exactly what took place on that headland. It is a scene of absolute horror."

TWO

THE EAVESDROPPER

The click which ensued—it was followed by a low humming—seemed to convey more to the two seated U.N.C.L.E. operatives than the fact that Waverly had turned on the projector, for they stiffened to instant alertness. It was as if that small, sharp sound possessed the miraculous power of bringing the gulf between the New York brownstone and the Newfoundland Banks.

There was no flickering, no slightest trace of distortion. The headland and the beach at its base stood out with a startling clarity and seemed to come right into the room, wrapped in what was unmistakably a gray overcast, but an overcast that wasn't pronounced enough to diminish visibility.

Standing rigid by the projector, Waverly paused for an instant to brush lint from his immaculate tweed jacket. His voice, when it came again, was raised half an octave higher.

"As you can see, it's a close view of about eighty feet of beach, with a towering cliff wall in the back ground. You can see the boulders fringing the shoreline so distinctly you can trace the veins where erosion has produced a kind of splitting. You can also see that Huntley and Rivers are aware of their peril, because the veins on their forehead stand out just as distinctly.

"One of the THRUSH officers will speak in a moment. Listen carefully to what he is saying."

Napoleon Solo leaned more sharply forward in his chair, but Kuryakin remained absolutely motionless, his posture as rigid as that of Waverly.

The officer had seemingly been speaking previously, for his face had the harsh, accusing look of a man who had been working himself into a rage.

His voice rang out in sudden sharpness, rising above the other sounds from the screen. "You committed a serious blunder. You talked about the precautions you'd taken to avoid exposure. I can quote your exact words, spoken less than twenty minutes ago."

For a full minute the voice droned on, accusation following accusation and making Solo and Illya exchange incredulous glances in stunned, tight-lipped silence. Waverly said not a word.

"I know," the THRUSH officer was saying. "It seems unbelievable, doesn't it? We were under the sea and you were standing on the cliff overhead, seven miles from the Project. No possibility of being overheard, eh? But—you were. And not by human ears—until we picked up the warning."

The THRUSH officer's voice became choked with rage and he spoke a few more words, even more startling in what they seemed to imply. Then he made an abrupt gesture and the three other officers drew long-barreled pistols. One of the pistols roared.

Huntley went spinning backwards to collide with the cliff wall and collapse in a heap at its base.

Rivers threw himself flat, recoiled backwards and whipped a tiny, gleaming object from under his greatcoat. Neither Solo or Illya had any doubt as to what the object was.

Rivers hurled the midget grenade at the four THRUSH officers and the screen became a roaring inferno of smoke and flame. When the smoke cleared the accusing officer was lying on the sand with his head blown off, the rest of him a gleaming, scarlet horror. And Rivers had regained his feet and was racing for the cliff wall, with an officer who had survived the blast in furious pursuit.

What followed brought a groan of anguish from a man who had seen more than one U.N.C.L.E. agent fall to his death.

The screen went blank and he said, "Something seems to have interrupted the telecast at this point. There's just one more brief pickup, lasting for less than thirty seconds. Watch not only the boat putting out to sea, but the left hand corner of the screen."

Again the screen filled with light and sound and color. A small boat was moving slowly away from the beach, with one officer at the oars, another lying slumped across the rail. And in the left hand corner of the screen a long gray undersea craft was riding the choppy waves, its decks agleam with spray.

"A THRUSH submarine, beyond any possibility of doubt," Illya said. "I can just make out the insignia on the conning tower."

All three men remained silent for a full minute after the screen went blank.

Then Waverly said: "There's another telecast I want you to look at, picked up in just as mysterious a way. It's quite brief, as you will see."

Almost instantly the screen grew very bright again, and a completely different kind of landscape came into view. Instead of towering cliffs walls swept by winter gales and a gray expanse of sea there stretched in all directions a level waste of sand, sun-drenched and almost featureless. Far in the distance a few dunes were faintly visible, obscured by a pale violet haze which seemed to hang suspended between the desert and the sky.

In the foreground a tall man wearing tropical shorts and a sun helmet sat on a tripod-shaped metal stool making a sketch with swift strokes on a sheet of paper pinned to a drawing board. He was darkly bearded and sun-bronzed, with hawklike features.

Suddenly he looked up and jumped to his feet with a wild cry, dropping the drawing board and backing away in terror from some thing which the three men in the darkened room could not see at all.

The something wasn't visible on the screen, and could have been a considerable distance from where the abruptly recoiling man had been sitting.

Just as abruptly the telecast flickered out.

"Watch," Waverly said, sharply. "Another picture is coming. It establishes something of great importance—that what you have just seen is a fragment from some kind of documentary record. It must have been intended to be just that, a televised documentary which THRUSH could hardly fail to find of interest."

When the screen lighted up again the drawing board appeared against a featureless gray background, so greatly enlarged that it almost filled the screen. The sketch which the artist had been making when the board had dropped to the sand was unfinished and extremely crude.

It depicted what looked like a dancing giant in a posture of ceremonial rigidity, as if its movements had become so formalized as that of a Balinese temple dancer. In a vague way it did seem either Balinese or Chinese, for the artist had placed upon its head a kind of tower-shaped turban tapering to a point.

An instant before the screen went dark again a cold, metallic voice spoke a few words: "Gobi—7Y887. Object pickup. Object pickup. Object pickup. Transmission channel T 56 H."

In tight-lipped silence Waverly left the projector, walked across the room and clicked on the overhead lights. His voice was emotion charged when he said: "Well, now you've seen both telecasts. John Blakeley has been missing for three weeks. No word from him at all. You recognized him, I'm sure, despite a three weeks' growth of beard."

"Yes, of course," Solo said. "Instantly. He went unshaven close to a month two years ago in the Sahara, when we—"

"He's working alone this time," Waverly said, cutting him short. "And there are parts of the Gobi which are quite different from the Sahara, apparently. That's why we sent him there. Strange lights in the sky, terrified natives and THRUSH in big, capital letters written right across the sky. Invisible to governmental intelligence agencies from here to Singapore perhaps, but not

to U.N.C.L.E. We've had too much experience in making that kind of writing visible."

"You filled us in pretty thoroughly about all of that last month," Solo said.

"What I didn't fill you in about, naturally," Waverly said, "was what you've just seen. A clearly established linkage between what happened in Newfoundland and whatever it was that made Blakeley draw that sketch and let it drop to the sand. Both of the telecasts were picked up in the same mysterious way and both apparently are directly related to a kind of eavesdropping that is without precedent in human experience. It is a kind of eavesdropping which could—"

Waverly stopped, rumbled in his pocket for his pipe and got it lighted again before going on. There was a grimly speculative look in his eyes.

"Perhaps we'd better discuss the whole eavesdropping problem for a moment," he said. "Suppose we try to put it into perspective, to relate it to the major problems which U.N.C.L.E. may find itself more and more involved with.

"There are four technological developments which threaten human survival on a worldwide scale. One, the population explosion, depends less on technology in a strict sense than on what medical science has accomplished in overcoming diseases that take a high toll of human life. But we may as well include it.

"Then there's the always present danger of thermonuclear destruction on a global scale and the equally serious threat of chemical and biological warfare on the same scale.

"But the greatest threat of all, perhaps the one most to be feared, is eavesdropping on a global scale. Do you realize what it could mean if there was no privacy left on earth, if everyone was under continuous observation night and day? Civilization would almost certainly come to a complete standstill. No one could even breathe without the certain knowledge that they were being spied upon. Every conversation would be picked up and processed and filed away for future reference. Would anyone care to talk or

carry on under such circumstances? The demoralization would be absolute. People would simply give up. Not at first. There would be ruthless tyrants still in the saddle. But eventually the blight would extend even to them."

Waverly puffed slowly on his pipe for a moment, staring at the projector as if he wished, despite what he had just said, that it were an all-seeing eye that could penetrate the walls of every THRUSH cell.

"If THRUSH possessed such a eavesdropping weapon," he went on, "they would not worry too much about how destructive it would ultimately prove. They would think only of how useful it would be to them in achieving world dominance. U.N.C.L.E. would be first in the line of attack. You can be sure of that."

He took another slow puff on his pipe. "That is why I wanted you to look at those telecasts," he said. "The plane will leave tomorrow afternoon at five o'clock. Your first stop will be Tokyo, where you will be briefed as to your exact itinerary. You will be flown to Inner Mongolia and then to the Gobi. The details have not yet been completely worked out. But everything will have been taken care of before you arrive at the Tokyo airport, where you will be met by a most genial gentleman. A pipe smoker, like myself."

THREE

THE WOMAN WHO WAS DRESSED KILL

WHEN SOLO AND Kuryakin emerged from the quiet brownstone they had the disturbing feeling that observant eyes were trained upon them. But they could not have said why, for the street was deserted along its entire length except for a parked limousine near the end of the block. The driver wore a chauffeur's uniform and he had descended from the car a was helping its three remaining occupants to descend to the curb.

The first was a young lady very curiously garbed. She wore a long yellow dress of shimmering silk which descended to her ankles and small golden slippers. Her hair, a lustrous black, was knotted into a double braid and

coiled tightly around her head in over-lapping folds. Her skin was of a satiny whiteness, but even from so great a distance they could see that her features were of oriental cast, the eyes almond-shaped, the cheek bones high-arching and prominent. Whether she was beautiful, plain-looking or ugly was hard to determine. But it seemed extremely unlikely that she could be ugly, and the likelihood of her being beautiful Solo put very high.

A tall, gaunt man, also unmistakably an oriental, followed her to the curb and was in turn followed by a frail, birdlike old man who appeared to be the last of the car's occupants, for the chauffeur slammed the rear door shut the instant he reached the sidewalk. The gaunt man was carrying a brown leather attaché case and the elderly man—his complexion was more yellowish than that of Mr. Tall—was wearing a beautifully tailored gray herringbone suit and a pearl gray homburg.

"Well, what do you think?" Solo asked, nudging Illya's arm.

"Probably headed for the United Nations," Kuryakin replied. "It's anybody's guess why they stopped off here. Perhaps to have lunch at one of the restaurants around the corner."

"Then why didn't they park directly in front of the restaurant?"

"Parking restrictions would account for that," Illya said, smiling. "We can watch and see where they go, if you like. I've a hunch that if Miss Chin O.Boy happened to be alone you'd follow her right into the restaurant."

"That's nonsense," Solo said. "From this distance I can't even see what she looks like."

"You'd find out quickly enough. Even from here she looks like a stunner to me. With a figure like that you couldn't go so far wrong even if her face was a little on the plain side."

"I don't like it," Solo said abruptly.

"Her face, you mean? But you just said you couldn't see—"

"Come off it, Illya," Solo said, cutting him short. His expression had become serious. "They're coming our way and there's something about this I don't like at all."

"But what, for Pete's sake? They look like United Nations people to me. A diplomatic big gun from Formosa, accompanied by his daughter and a legation secretary or interpreter."

"I don't think they're from Formosa. Or the Chinese mainland, for that matter."

"You still haven't told me precisely what you don't like about it."

"Three things," Solo said. "They drive up and park the instant we walk out. They're not heading for a restaurant but walking our way and walking quite fast. And I don't like the look on their faces. I can see Miss Chin O.Boy's face quite clearly now and you guessed right about her. She is beautiful, a real stunner. But I think you got her name all wrong. It isn't Miss Chin O.Boy. It's Chin Quickie Deathie."

Illya's handsome Slavic features paled slightly. "You can't believe that! Napoleon, they'd never try it! Not in broad daylight!"

"Speed is of the essence," Solo snapped. "Watch that attaché case! I'll keep my eye on the girl!"

"We've just time to get back inside!" Illya said, his eyes darting to the quiet brownstone. "Perhaps we'd better—"

"And make them just suicidally frustrated enough to blow up the entire block before we can warn Waverly? It's unlikely, but it could happen. No, we've got to stay on the target range until it's over."

Illya nodded. "You're right, of course. One advantage, they don't think we suspect them."

Solo silenced him with a gesture. "We move first, but we have about ten more seconds. Tick them off in your mind. Start now. In ten more seconds,

twelve at most, they'll be within a few feet of us."

Both Solo and Kuryakin knew exactly what to do when the countdown ended. The situation conformed to an Unusual Attack briefing which U.N.C.L.E. kept under double lock and key for the benefit of Section II trainees confronted with just such an emergency.

Illya counted slowly, his eyes on the approaching woman in shimmering silk and her two male companions. He appeared to be watching the three with the slightly heightened interest an average New Yorker would have displayed on seeing three turbaned East Indians walking down the avenue.

Far down the street the chauffeur had not moved from beside the car. He was leaning against the hood of the car, reading a newspaper.

SEVEN… *eight*... *nine*. Was Solo counting too? Illya wondered. He had a way of cheating a little at times when he didn't need to tick off the seconds in his mind to know exactly when to bring his hair-trigger reflexes into play.

The woman was walking between the birdlike little man and the gaunt Chinese near-giant with slightly downcast eyes, as if Solo's admiring stare, while pleasing to her, was making her blush inwardly. They were less than twenty feet away when Illya reached the count of twelve.

The tube which he removed from beneath his right lapel was just a little larger than a fountain pen, an all-metal job with a flaring tip. With quick and absolute accuracy of aim he trained it on the right arm of the tall, gaunt man. It vibrated slightly and made a faint hissing sound.

He sprinted forward the instant he fired and caught the briefcase as it dropped from the gaunt man's completely paralyzed hand.

Illya bent and set the attaché case gingerly down on the curb, not unmindful of what the destructive consequences might be if he made the mistake of jarring it. He had sufficient time to do this before turning to see what Solo had accomplished, because the paralysis he'd inflicted on the gaunt man's

arm had been preceded by a pain so searing that a cry of agony had gone echoing along the street, to the accompaniment of retreating footsteps.

Not only did the gaunt Chinese go reeling backwards to the opposite curb. He kept right on screaming, as if he feared that his arm had been completely severed at the wrist and his hand was gone forever.

When Illya turned he saw that Solo had grasped the hem of the Chinese woman's long, flowing dress and wound it tightly around her ankles, tightening it until she could not move. He was now engaged in lowering her to the pavement and thumping her from hips to shoulder to make sure she was weaponless.

The small, birdlike man had turned and was racing back along the street toward the limousine, his homburg, caught in a sudden flurry of wind, spinning along the street in the opposite direction.

The shimmeringly attired woman was now lying stretched out at full length on the pavement and Solo was kneeling at her side. His voice rang out sharply. "You made it necessary for me to forget that you are a woman. Stay right where you are, and don't attempt to get up. If you do I'll forget again. You're in serious trouble."

"It is you who are in trouble!" The Chinese woman raised herself slightly, despite Solo's firm grip on her shoulder. Her eyes flashed defiantly as she went on, talking very rapidly.

"The two telecasts everything you thought would remain a secret are known to us. When you sat watching the screen you were under observation. Every word you spoke was recorded. And that surveillance will continue. We are so strong now we can afford to let you know this. Knowing that you are under observation, night and day, will make you more vulnerable."

Her voice rose mockingly. "Yes, a great deal more vulnerable. You will never know—"

Solo did not wait to hear more. He arose, whipped a flat-barreled pistol from under his coat and gestured Illya toward the woman on the pavement.

"Watch her!" he said. "If she tries to get up slap her. You'll have to. It may not be too late to get to that car before it turns the corner."

Illya shook his head and pointed, and Solo's gaze traveled swiftly down the long street to where the car had been parked. A look of astonishment came into his eyes, and he froze to immobility.

The car was in motion, but it wasn't turning the corner. It was coming straight down the street toward them, zigzagging a little because of the tremendous speed at which it was being driven.

In another instant it was abreast of them. Solo raised his gun as it screeched to a halt and sent two bullets crashing through the windshield. He saw the tall, gaunt man sway, clutch at his chest and sink below the level of the shattered glass.

But that did not prevent the chauffeur from leaping to the street with a pistol twice the length of Solo's in his clasp. He leveled it at Solo's head and fired.

It was a powerful weapon and the report was thunderous. Fortunately that had nothing to do with the accuracy of the chauffeur's aim. It was a clean miss, but it accomplished its purpose. So sudden and unexpected was the blast that Solo remained stunned for an instant. Illya had taken a quick step toward him, away from the woman on the pavement and was equally stunned by the nearness of the blast.

It gave the chauffeur just enough time to lift the Chinese woman in his arms and stagger with her back to the car. Before Solo could fire again the limousine was roaring down the street in the opposite direction from which it had come.

FOUR

THE WEB TIGHTENS

ALEXANDER WAVERLY, for the second time that day, had ceased to be his usual business-like self. A small muscle in his jaw twitched as he stood

staring down at the angular, somewhat flattened metal object on his desk.

The object had been removed from the attaché case which Solo had carried into the quiet brownstone, and turned over to U.N.C.L.E.'s most experienced bomb disassembling expert without delay. A number of unattached wires projected from a yawning cavity from which a metal cap had been lifted by Waverly himself, for the expert had assured him that the device was now as harmless as the paper weight which had been pushed aside to make room for it in the precise middle of the desk.

"You would both have been killed instantly," Waverly said. "It would have been hurled straight at you, and they would have dropped to the pavement and flattened themselves. The blast would have ripped through you at chest-level, and blown you apart. It has a built-in radiation dampening mechanism, which goes into operation the instant the concussion starts to spread."

Waverly nodded grimly, his eyes riveted to the dismantled instrument of destruction on his desk. "A self-limiting bomb with a vengeance—an achievement we've kept so secret, so scrupulously guarded, its theft would have seemed inconceivable to me if those two telecasts hadn't convinced me that all of our technological secrets are in jeopardy. From what you told me that long-gowned woman said—"

He stopped, as if the startled exclamation which the announcement had elicited from Solo had reminded him that an apology was due. "I had no intention, of course, of keeping it a secret from you, Mr. Solo. Or from you, Mr. Kuryakin. But its perfection was of very recent date, and for the past few days what you saw on the screen this morning has driven every other thought from my mind."

"It was natural enough for you to think that the telecasts had nothing to do with the perfection of a new kind of—hand grenade, I guess you'd call it," Solo said, nod ding. "If the theft had not occurred the matter would have been of no great importance. Field testing of such a device can't be hurried, as a rule. You'd have let us know about it before it became operational."

"It seems to have taken THRUSH a comparatively short time to duplicate it, make it operational right in front of this house." Waverly paused an instant to stare down again at the device on his desk.

"If the chauffeur had been willing to sacrifice his long-gowned girlfriend and had snatched up the attaché case instead we might have had a conclusive demonstration of the weapon's effectiveness in a field test. Only you wouldn't have been here to fill us in."

"I don't think she was his girlfriend, Mr. Waverly," Illya said. "Or the girlfriend of the man who was carrying the attaché case."

"Why not?" Waverly asked.

"The chauffeur must have been extremely fond of her, to take the risk he did. The chances were all against him, and if he hadn't fired at almost point-blank range and moved incredibly fast after scoring amiss—"

"I think I know why Mr. Kuryakin shares my feeling that she wasn't the girlfriend of the two younger men," Solo said. "Or of the elderly one, for that matter. Just the fact that there were no weapons on her person suggests that she had absolute confidence in the weapon they stole from us. She almost had to have another reason for being there."

"You've told me what you thought that reason might have been," Alexander Waverly re minded him. "To round out the picture in Chinese brocade. Take the long-gowned woman away and what reason would you have had to think that they were headed for the United Nations?"

"They could have made it look convincing in some other way," Solo said. "What I told you was true—up to a point. But I still believe she had another reason for being there."

"Well, let's have it," Waverly said. "I hope it's based on some thing more solid than conjecture."

"It may have to be partly conjecture," Solo said. "There's nothing about this affair that provides the kind of evidence a lawyer could use in a courtroom

to convince a jury. We're dealing with an empire of crime that knows how to strike in the dark and leave plenty of misleading clues."

"An empire of crime," Waverly said, nodding. "I think I know why you referred to THRUSH in that way, Mr. Solo. You're going to tell me she impressed you as being— well, empresslike. By her manner, perhaps. An air of dominance about her?"

Solo found it difficult to conceal his astonishment. "That hits it pretty squarely on the head," he said. "She didn't do any actual commanding. But there was something about her, all apart from her striking beauty, that made me feel she was accustomed to giving orders and would if the need arose."

"I got that impression too," Illya said. "I think Mr. Solo means that she was there because the attack was so important that she felt her presence might be needed. She wanted to make sure it went off as planned."

"There's one thing that strongly supports that conjecture," Waverly conceded, nodding. "What she said to Mr. Solo. 'Knowing that you are under observation, night and day, will make you more vulnerable. We are so strong now we can afford to let you know this.'"

"That's about it," Solo said. "I was so concerned about what was happening at the end of the street I didn't catch everything she said."

"You caught enough." Waverly said. "Only someone very high up in THRUSH would have talked that way. She was deliberately revealing something that ordinarily would have been kept a carefully guarded secret, in a clear attempt to spread demoralization throughout our entire organization."

"But she must have been lying, Mr. Waverly," Illya said. "If everything that takes place here is instantly known to THRUSH, including what we're saying right now, we'd be facing a threat to our survival that could destroy us in a week. The blueprints alone—" Something in Waverly's eyes stopped him from going on.

"IF THEIR eavesdropping capacity had reached that stage we would have been destroyed already," Illya Kuryakin said. "Make no mistake about that. A continuous conversational pickup would be a weapon we'd have no way of overcoming."

"But what about the Newfoundland and Gobi telecasts?" Solo said. "And the theft and swift duplication of at least one of our weapons? The failure of their surprise attack doesn't strip it of its eavesdropping implications. They undoubtedly knew just when we'd be leaving this house, after looking at the telecasts and discussing the Gobi assignment. Their timing was perfect."

"That observation is very much to the point," Waverly said. "But to me it's far from conclusive. They must have possessed the stolen weapon long before they planned the attack, for they could hardly have duplicated it overnight. A minor consideration, but an important one. It suggests that they've been gathering information piecemeal, sporadically, over a considerable period of time."

Waverly remained silent for an instant. Then he said: "I mentioned operational delays in connection with the actual field testing of a new weapon. The weapon may work very well once or twice and then develop defects which it may take a long time to overcome."

Waverly's expression became increasingly grim. "Sometimes it works perfectly for ten or twelve test runs and then breaks down completely. Or it may not work at all at first, and suddenly be just right."

"Then you're suggesting—" Solo paused, waiting for the older man to continue. He had spoken more to reassure his chief that he had been listening intently than because he was impatient to know what Waverly was going to say. He had very little doubt on that score.

"I'm almost certain that THRUSH'S new eavesdropping weapon is still in the experimental testing stage," Waverly went on earnestly. "Apparently they are having difficulties with it, despite the Newfoundland and Gobi telecasts. If it worked to perfection we'd know about it, because we'd be in immediate trouble on a global scale. That hasn't happened *so far*."

Waverly's expression made it plain that he shared their belief that U.N.C.L.E. had never before been confronted with quite so grave a peril.

He said: "I am advancing your departure by fifteen hours. Any further delay would be extremely unwise and there is no actual need for it. All of the arrangements which must be made can, I'm confident, be completed before you arrive in Tokyo."

FIVE

TOKYO BRIEFING

THE MAN WHO had met them at the Tokyo airport a half hour previously said: "Setting you down in the Gobi by helicopter will be no problem at all. You can forget all about the political hazards. You'll be nondescript Europeans on an archeological junket."

He was a small, gray man with a neatly trimmed Van Dyke and he displayed the kind of assurance that Napoleon Solo liked. His name was Roger Harris and he spoke with a slight Scottish accent.

"The Gobi has a way of making both Americans and Europeans invisible," he went on smilingly. "You'll be swallowed up in its vastness. Security barriers are practically nonexistent in the area where Blakeley vanished. A dozen 'copters could cross that area fifty times a week, and no one would be the wiser."

Solo nodded and looked around the steel-walled, soundproof room in which the briefing was taking place. "U.N.C.L.E. has few friends in that particular area," Harris went on, as if aware of Solo's thoughts. "But by the same token, few enemies to worry about. You can travel for miles and meet no one at all. The native guides and trackers don't give a hoot about politics. The camels probably know more about ideology than they do—because when some harsh little official has a mission to complete you can be sure he doesn't spare them."

"Planes haven't replaced camels to any extent, then?" Illya asked. "I thought perhaps tractors and even tanks had become quite common."

"Only in certain areas," Harris said. "In many parts of the desert the transportation system hasn't changed in four thousand years.

Harris glanced at his wrist-watch, set his steel-rimmed glasses a little more firmly on his nose and looked down at a paper on his desk.

"Everything has been arranged," he said. "Your itinerary will be a three-stage affair. You'll be flown by jet from Tokyo to a secret U.N.C.L.E. landing field in Inner Mongolia and from there by 'copter to the Gobi and northward to the area where Blakeley vanished. Then the 'copter will take off but remain on call, and you'll go on with the three desert guides we've engaged to help you make sure that nothing that would be invisible from the air escapes you.

"You'll have to circle around quite a bit and examine many landscape features at very close range—the slow, patient way. A 'copter would have to keep setting you down and taking you off, and even then—"

"Yes, I understand all that," Solo said, nodding. "Mr. Waverly explained it to us in New York, stressed just how important experienced trackers are. The natives know as much about the Gobi as they do about the lines on their palms. We, of course, are amateurs with a vengeance, as far as the Gobi is concerned."

"But not otherwise, Mr. Solo," Harris said, the smile returning to his lips. "Your desert accomplishments in other parts of the world would merit a double row of medals, if U.N.C.L.E. did not have a prejudice against rewarding merit in that way. It has always seemed to me a needless restriction."

His gaze passed to Illya. "You also, Mr. Kuryakin. Your reputation has gone before you, if you'll forgive my saying so." The levity went out of his eyes.

"The instant you leave this building you will be driven straight to the plane which will fly you to Inner Mongolia. Mr. Waverly felt no conversation

should pass between us concerning the precise moment of your departure until I set the time myself at the end of your briefing. The pilots of the plane do not even know the exact time of your arrival. They have merely been instructed to be ready to take off the instant you appear at the airfield."

Harris restacked the papers on his desk into a slightly neater looking pile and arose. "Well then," he said. "I guess that takes care of everything. Good luck to both of you."

THE TWO GUARDS stationed at the high, mesh-wire gate of the airfield had apparently signaled the control tower that an authorized car was coming, for the gate swung slowly open as the limousine bearing the two U.N.C. L.E. agents approached.

As the car swept past the guards, who stood stiffly at attention, Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin relaxed a little. They were certain that they had not been followed. The car continued on across the airfield toward the seven jets that stood at irregular intervals on the far side of the control tower. There were several empty runways and no stir or activity at all around the slender gray planes.

There could be no doubt that U.N.C.L.E.'s Tokyo unit had planned well. Careful timing could apparently work miracles.

In a competitive industrial set up, as Harris had explained to them before their departure, secrecy could be carried so far that the arrival and departure of planes adhered to no set schedule, and the customary activities of an airfield could slow, at times, to a standstill.

Government inspection was, of course, unavoidable. But it could be made infrequently by a scrupulous avoidance of flight requirement violations, and a little judicious wire-pulling.

Among the nondescript Japanese jets there would, Solo felt, be a plane of quite different character. Silk contracts and the discreet consignment of forbidden merchandise to the highest bidder would have nothing whatever

to do with its swift takeoff. He was equally certain that the agent at the wheel of the limousine would be quick to recognize that particular jet.

He was not mistaken. But its distinguishing mark, a tiny glow-dot on one of its swept-back wings, was so inconspicuous that Solo would have failed to notice it if the driver hadn't halted the car and called it to his attention.

"Well, here's where we part," he said. "You'll be high in the sky in just about eight more minutes. Setting you down in Inner Mongolia will be no problem for Hart and Ovenden. They're not just competent pilots. There are none better anywhere."

Kuryakin said, "Just how top-echelon are the pilots who'll be waiting for us in the helicopter?"

"Just as experienced," the U.N.C.L.E. agent at the wheel said. "They made six flights over the Gobi before Blakeley' disappeared."

"There are a lot of things we don't know," Solo said wryly. "Including what the Gobi does to you when you look down on it from the air for the first time."

The agent at the wheel grinned. "Don't worry. The lads who'll meet you at sunrise survived it and are in the best of spirits. Good luck now. Success all the way."

"Thanks," Solo said, returning the other's grin. "Luck should be at a premium in the Gobi. But maybe we can scrape up enough to see us through."

Solo and Illya descended from the car, and crossed to the jet with out looking back. The aluminum ladder had twenty-five or thirty rungs, but they ascended so swiftly that they were inside the plane be fore the usual transition from sun light to artificial light could be adjusted to gradually.

For a moment their vision remained hazy and they could barely make out two tall figures standing just outside the pilot compartment where the

double row of seats terminated. They could hear the ladder being drawn up as one of them advanced toward them, his features a blurred oval.

His hand was extended in greeting and before he spoke Solo's vision became much clearer, and he recognized the man from the description which Harris had given him.

"You got here in good time," the tall pilot said. "Mr. Harris instructed us to take off immediately. That we can do. Unless, of course, there's something he may have neglected to tell us you'd like to talk about first. We're in no immediate danger and a few extra minutes—"

Solo shook his head. "The sooner we're in the air the better I'll feel," he said. "I'm not sure just how detailed Mr. Harris' instructions were. But we have reason to believe that what we're saying now could set off an alert that could prove dangerous at the end of— well, say fifteen or twenty minutes. It would all depend on how quickly a THRUSH plane or armored car could get here."

The pilot's equally tall companion had joined him in time to catch what Solo .was saying. "Yes, of course, we realize that," he said, replying without waiting for the other to nod in agreement. "I'm Thomas Ovenden. This is Mr. Hart. Our instructions were very detailed. Your briefing took place under unusual precautions, in a soundproof room. And you were rushed here immediately, with the time and destination not revealed to you until you were ready to leave—solely as an added precaution."

He paused an instant, then went on quickly: "We had no knowledge as to precisely when you would arrive. We were just warned to remain on the alert, that your actual arrival would take the place of a transmitted message. Now that you're here I agree that we should take off immediately."

"We can risk perhaps another minute—against my better judgment," Solo said. "Just how were your instructions conveyed to you—remaining on the alert and all that? Surely not in short wave, scrambled or otherwise."

The pilot who had identified himself as Ovenden and whose hawklike features and British accent matched the description Harris had supplied

shook his head. "No range finding risk, if that's what you're thinking. We've never sent Harris a message or received one on this airfield. This plane has been here for a week, and all arrangements concerning it were made before your arrival in Tokyo. Previous to your arrival it was used by our Tokyo unit for other purposes. We received our instructions in the same soundproof room where you were briefed, before Mr. Harris met you at the airport. Then we drove straight here. A three-hour drive, as you know."

"We're wasting precious seconds," Illya Kuryakin said. "Pilots are seldom briefed that extensively. But I guess it was necessary in this case. Since you know so much we can have an enjoyable time discussing it. But not now."

There was a harsh impatience in Illya's voice, but neither of the two pilots appeared to resent it. They nodded, turned and strode swiftly back along the aisle to the pilot compartment. The dividing panel opened and closed and Solo remained standing very still for a moment, staring at Illya in surprise.

"That came close to a reprimand," Solo said. "It wasn't their fault they were told so much. Harris must have had a reason—"

"There's something about this I don't like," Illya said. "I can't pin it down, exactly. But when you said, 'We can risk another minute' they seemed to leap at the opportunity of spelling everything out. At least, Ovenden did, as if he was afraid you wouldn't believe him."

"He just answered my question," Solo pointed out. "Fairly concisely, I'd say. He could see I was concerned. If that's all that's bugging you—"

"If THRUSH could pick human voices right out of the air on a Newfoundland headland and send that pickup instantly racing along undersea to a THRUSH submarine in a matter of minutes anything is possible," Illya said.

"You're suggesting, then—" Solo paused, to stare at Illya intently. It was a thought which, unknown to Illya, had flashed for the barest instant across his own mind. But he had dismissed as too incredible, in view of the fact that the two pilots conformed to the descriptions which Harris had given them, even to Ovenden's British accent. But the fact that Illya appeared to

take it seriously gave him pause, for he had the highest respect for the younger agent's judgment.

"I'm not sure," Illya said. He hesitated, a look of deepening concern in his eyes. He was returning Napoleon Solo's stare.

"They seemed to know more than Harris could have told them," he said, clearly unaware of how much progress he had made in that respect. "One or two small details almost on the—well, the all-seeing level. All-seeing as far as this particular operation goes, if you know what I mean. That may sound a little far-out, but—"

"It doesn't," Solo said quickly. "It fits, in a way, and I don't like it either. But there are—"

They both saw it at the same instant, a thin ribbon of blood snaking across the passenger cabin between the double row of seats close to where they were standing.

SOLO DREW in his breath sharply, and gripped the arm of the last seat on the left side of the aisle as he stared down at it. Kuryakin gripped Solo's arm just as tightly, and pointed in silence at the scarlet trickle. He seemed not to realize that there was no need for him to draw Solo's attention to it.

Though Solo's voice, when it came, was perfectly controlled its very calmness had a forced quality.

"Now we are sure," he said. "Stay right where you are, and watch the pilot compartment while I look. They've been dragged out of sight somewhere behind us—no room under the seats. If the panel opens shoot to kill."

"Right," Illya said. "But make it quick. If the plane takes off—"

"We've got to risk that," Solo said. "If they're still alive, we'll need them. If they've been killed we'll have at least a fighting chance of forcing those THRUSH pilots to set us down in Inner Mongolia. The odds against us will be heavier if we don't know what the score is."

Illya nodded and worked a special pistol with a five-inch barrel loose from its holder beneath his coat. He trained it on the pilot compartment, his lips set in tight lines.

"Go ahead," he said. "We could be making a mistake by not blasting that pair right out of their seats first. But it's almost a toss-up. They'd be no good to us dead, as you say."

Solo gripped Illya firmly by the shoulder for an instant, his voice reassuring. "It will only take a minute to find out. Then we'll know exactly where we stand."

Solo swung about and moved swiftly into the shadowy rear section of the passenger cabin where the seats terminated. He glanced just as swiftly around him, his eyes sweeping over the entire section. He saw nothing at first but a gray expanse of metal hemming him in on four sides. Then he looked down and saw that the ribbon of blood— it had widened slightly— led from the last of the seats to a point mid way between the seats and a paneled doorway which matched the one which opened on the pilot compartment at the opposite end of the passenger cabin.

He was not interested in what he might have found beyond that doorway, because the ribbon of blood terminated in another panel set midway in the rear section.

It could hardly have opened on a large compartment, in view of its location. He was almost sure that it opened on a small storage compartment.

The panel did not open when he tugged at the small metal knob which projected from it. He removed from his pocket a knifelike device as specialized as the extremely short-barreled pistol which Illya was keeping trained on the pilot compartment and set to work on the knob and the lock on the inner side of the panel which prevented him from turning it.

The knifelike device had six blades and the one which he used on the knob was hollow. From it there came a beam of heat.

The knob glowed white-hot for an instant, then disintegrated. The glow vanished without spreading and an ash-encircled aperture an inch in diameter replaced the vanished knob.

Into the aperture Napoleon Solo inserted another blade terminating in a tiny metal hand, flexible-fingered. There was a faint clicking noise as the lock opened and the metal panel glided slowly leftward under the steady pressure of his palm.

He found himself staring into a lighted storage compartment about nine feet square.

His lips tightened as he stared. But it was not as shaken as he might have been if he had not visualized in advance almost precisely how the two U.N.C.L.E. pilots had fared.

They were both securely bound. One sat upright with his eyes wide open in the middle of the compartment, two feet from where the other lay with his back to the panel, his body grotesquely contorted.

Both bore a twin-close resemblance to the two THRUSH agents in general build, the pilot sitting upright a facial resemblance to the most talkative of that spurious pair which identified him as Ovenden.

The thin ribbon of blood was coming from beneath the right shoulder of the pilot lying prone, but it was wider than a ribbon at its source. There was an unmistakable look of recognition in Ovenden's eyes as he returned Solo's stare and, tightly bound as he was, he made an effort to rise.

Solo shook his head, gesturing as he spoke. "No, don't try to get up," he cautioned. "I'll have you untied in a moment. You must be Ovenden. I'm Napoleon Solo. But we've no time to talk. Just lie still now—"

"Hart's badly wounded," Ovenden said, nodding. "He may be dead. I don't know. They took us by surprise—"

"How long ago?" Solo asked kneeling at Ovenden's side and setting expertly to work on the cords at his wrists.

"An hour perhaps. One of them clobbered me, but I don't think the blackout lasted for more than a minute or two. The panel was just closing when I came to."

"They bound you up fast and left. Is that it?"

Ovenden smiled faintly. "That's right. My own twin brother clobbered me. At least that's what any one would have thought. He even had my Sussex accent down pat. The other one shot Hart, when he put up a fight."

Solo had freed Ovenden's wrists and was working just as expertly at the cords at his ankles when he paused an instant to grip him firmly by the arm.

"Listen carefully. The THRUSH agent who clobbered you and the one who made us believe he was Hart are sitting in the pilot compartment about ready to take off. Kuryakin is sitting with a gun trained on the panel, in case something makes them suspicious. There's something more—"

"Go on," Ovenden said, as the cords at his ankle fell away. "I can see we'll have to act fast—"

"You've guessed it," Solo said. "With your help we'll have an even better chance to take them. Three against a very dangerous two. Make no mistake about that. They're armed, of course."

"Don't I know it!" Ovenden said.

"This time U.N.C.L.E has the advantage of surprise. But first you can help me find out just how badly Hart is wounded. We've got to turn him over and raise him very gently, in case it's real bad."

It took them only a moment to find out just how bad it was. When they knelt on both sides of the prone pilot and raised him to a sitting position his glassily staring eyes made it impossible for them to doubt that he was dead.

They eased him just as gently back to a prone position and stood up. A moment later they were moving swiftly toward the double row of chairs, where Illya Kuryakin was still sitting motionless with his gun trained on the

closed panel of the pilot compartment. Just as they reached his side a distinct tremor passed through the plane and an all-too-familiar hum made their eardrums vibrate. The jet had taken off.

SIX

STAY ALERT—OR DIE

A SURPRISE ATTACK on two armed THRUSH pilots in a jet that had broken the sound barrier could so easily have sent the plane spiraling earthward, perhaps in flames, that Solo, Illya and the man at their side paused for an instant to discuss it in whispers before opening the panel wide.

"We may have to shoot it out with them," Solo said. "But let's hope we can avoid that risk. With guns at their backs we should be able to persuade them to surrender their pistols and set the controls to keep the plane stable and on course until we've walked them back here. Guns at their backs first. Is that clear?"

He turned and spoke directly to Ovenden before the pilot or Illya Kuryakin could reply. "How long do you think it will take you to slip into one of the vacated pilot seats and take over? Perhaps we can skip ordering them to set the controls."

Ovenden shook his head. "Not wise," he said. "I'll stand behind you and watch every move they make. If they set the controls a fraction off, or try to, I'll know. For a few seconds it may be touch and go, and a lot of things could keep me from taking over in time. With the controls set we'll have an added margin of safety."

A grim smile flickered for an instant on his lips. "If there's any shooting an extra gun would be of more value than a sitting duck in the pilot seat."

"I couldn't agree more," Solo said. "Here we go then. Our timing had better be good."

Solo opened the panel wide and moved swiftly into the pilot compartment up behind Ovenden's THRUSH twin, whose rigid posture as he sat leaning forward over the controls gave him almost the look of a carven stone replica of the man whose identity he had assumed. Illya moved just as quickly up behind the second pilot. Both agents jammed their pistols against the backs of the seated men at the same instant, but it was Solo who did the talking.

"Don't make a move until I tell you what to do," he said. "That goes for both of you. Keep your reflexes under control. If you don't—you'll be blown apart."

Ovenden had taken up his position just behind the pair, midway between Solo and Illya.

He spoke as warningly as Solo had done, the instant the vituperation stopped. "Set the controls! Be quick about it, if you want to stay alive. I'll be watching every move you make."

The two pilots obeyed, in total silence. Solo watched their hands moving over the panel as closely as Ovenden did, and though he lacked Ovenden's specialized knowledge as to just how they should be set to keep the jet steadily on course he was sure that it was being done right. Otherwise Ovenden would have tapped him lightly on the back and advised him to let the gun in his hand go off.

Solo darted one brief glance at Illya and saw that the latter was just as alert, his eyes trained on the rapidly moving fingers of the pilot in his charge.

As soon as the task was completed Solo said: "All right now, get up. Very slowly. Then turn around, just as slowly, and walk back through the panel to the nearest seat. When you're both seated we are going to have the pleasure of tying you up. That will spoil your comfort just a little, I'm afraid. But a coffin would be much more cramping. Don't fail to bear that in mind."

The pilot who had assumed the identity of Hart fell in the suggestion instantly and had risen and was just starting to turn when the other took a risk that could easily have proved suicidal.

Instead of rising he lurched violently sideways and then let his entire body sag. He was below the seat, and pivoting about on his knees when Solo's gun went off. As the gun roared Solo was thrown off balance by the tight grip which the insanely reckless THRUSH pilot instantly clamped on his knees. But only for an instant. Before the smoke of the blast cleared Solo had not only succeeded in regaining his balance but was smashing down with the barrel of his gun on the kneeling pilot's skull.

As the man collapsed with a groan he heard Illya Kuryakin cry out sharply. "Don't try what he did! Stop turning. Stand perfectly still. Don't force me to put a bullet through your head."

Solo stood for a moment utterly rigid, his eyes sweeping the pilot compartment in concern. Then Ovenden was at his side, staring down at the slumped pilot at the base of the seat. The pilot in Illya's charge was still on his feet, staring into the barrel of Kuryakin's short-muzzled weapon.

"Look around you quickly," Solo breathed, gripping Ovenden's arm. "Did that shot do any damage, do you think? If it shattered one of the instruments __"

Ovenden shook his head. "No, I'm sure it didn't. The panel's okay."

Minutes later both pilots were sitting securely bound in the two front seats of the passenger cabin.

Obviously, THRUSH had indeed moved fast, in the space of six or seven short hours, to put a personnel computer to work and send a car speeding down the road to the airfield containing two operatives who bore the closest possible resemblance to Ovenden and Hart, right down to Ovenden's British accent. It must, Napoleon Solo told himself, have involved a miracle of almost lightning swift planning.

The disguise itself had presented no great problem, for the physical characteristics of Ovenden and Hart were not difficult to simulate with the help of judiciously applied makeup. They were frequently encountered types in a flattering sense, for they were robustly built with clean-cut, handsome features. There were many Harts and Ovendens, and although

Ovenden's British accent may have presented more of a problem it had apparently not proved insurmountable, since THRUSH had available for instant assignment not a few operatives with British accents.

Just how a THRUSH car had succeeded in getting past the gate of the privately owned airfield without arousing suspicion was anybody's guess, and had now became of comparatively minor importance, though Solo made a mental note that Harris must eventually be informed that U.N.C.L.E.'S undercover influence might be on the wane at that particular airfield.

Solo had no longer any doubt that, whether Waverly was right or wrong about the inscrutable instrument of science which THRUSH had at its command, it had functioned twice in Tokyo with absolute accuracy. Twice THRUSH ears had listened in on a conversation in a soundproof room in which no listening device could possibly have been concealed—had spied on plans discussed with absolute secrecy, and taken instant measures to bring about his and Illya's destruction.

More than their destruction, perhaps, for if the two THRUSH pilots had succeeded they would not have been taken to Inner Mongolia, but in all likelihood to a THRUSH cell.

But important as knowing all that was, it paled into temporary insignificance before a single question that Solo felt he should perhaps not have waited quite so long to ask Ovenden. He asked it now.

"Can you fly this jet alone to Inner Mongolia? If you can't, we'll have to turn back. But returning to Tokyo now would jeopardize our entire mission. THRUSH is on the alert with a vengeance now."

Ovenden stared at Solo steadily for a moment before he said: "I can try. That is all that I can promise."

"With a reasonable chance of succeeding? Be completely honest."

"An eighty percent chance, I think," Ovenden said. "Not higher."

"Good enough," Solo said. "If we returned to Tokyo the odds would be just as high."

Solo turned to Illya. "I don't think we'll be making a mistake if we stay right on course. How do you feel about it?"

"Precisely as you do," Illya said.

"Both of the pilot seats have been vacant for fifteen or twenty minutes," Solo said. "I wouldn't enjoy flying on set controls all the way to China. It's time for one of those chairs to be occupied by someone in whom I have complete trust. We'll be over the Sea of Japan in another ten minutes."

"I'll do my best," Ovenden said. He gestured toward the bound THRUSH pilots. "What will we do with them?"

"They'll have to live on goat's milk for awhile in Inner Mongolia," Solo said. "We'll just set them out to pasture." Solo's expression changed, became more somber. "There will have to be a burial at sea, I'm afraid," he said. "Unless—"

He paused an instant, then shook his head. "No, a grave in a desert waste, so remote from civilization, would be very much the same thing, and a burial at sea—"

"I think Hart would have preferred that," Ovenden said, nodding.

SEVEN

IN THE LAND OF AN ANGRY SUN

HAD IT NOT been for the sound of human voices around him, the Gobi would have seemed unreal to Napoleon Solo.

The hot, bright sunlight, the endless miles of trackless desert and the scoured, brightly gleaming bowl of the sky had combined to make Solo feel that he had been set down by a long departed helicopter in some larger-

than-life wasteland that had come spiraling straight out of the unknown. But in another way it was as real as the glistening lake of perspiration on his brow.

"We certainly can't complain about the timing of that 'copter pickup," Solo said. "But Harris seems to have arranged this stage even better. Practically to perfection so far, and we've no reason to believe there's going to be any change. Sun Lin is a first-rate guide, the best. He never raises his voice. But have you noticed how expeditiously he gets things done?"

"I've noticed," Illya Kuryakin said, nodding. "I've an idea he'll appreciate the compliment. He has pretty sharp hearing."

As the two agents turned back toward their camels and the motionless figure of the head guide Solo had no doubt at all that Illya was correct in his surmise. Precisely what did the Gobi, he wondered, symbolize to the oriental mind? Probably just the harnessing and unharnessing of camels, the pitching of camp at nightfall and the rushing in the dawn that preceded another long day's journey across endless miles of sand.

He was equally sure that Sun Lin was no fool and a better than average desert tracker and guide.

"How long will it be?" he asked. "Two more hours—three?"

"We are very close to where the American you seek was last seen," Sun Lin said. "Two hours, yes. But it will be dark when we get there."

"I was afraid of that," Illya said. "It's getting dark already. We'll probably have to postpone our search until tomorrow."

"The time factor isn't that important," Solo said. "Blakeley vanished three weeks ago, so what difference will a few extra hours make? Starting from where he was last seen and searching the surrounding desert is probably our best bet, but we can't be sure of anything. He may have wandered on for miles, may even have reached Inner Mongolia—"

Solo gestured toward a rise in the sand a hundred feet to the east of them. "He could be sitting right over there, behind that big dune, down to his last drop of water."

"You're taking it for granted that he's still alive," Illya said. "I'm afraid I'm not that optimistic."

"I'm only optimistic about one thing," Solo said. "A desert waste where there's little or no rainfall and travelers are rarely encountered can stay unchanged for weeks. If we search carefully we may find some clue as to precisely what happened—evidences of a struggle perhaps, or footprints leading in just one direction."

"I guess I can buy that," Illya said. "Onward then, with stout hearts and banners flying."

Solo looked back and saw that Sun Lin's two desert-tracking companions had halted their camels some sixty feet from where he had dismounted with Kuryakin and the enigmatic oriental. He gestured for the journey to be resumed, remounting his own camel as he did so.

A moment later all five camels were jogging onward again over an almost level expanse of sand, with Solo and Kuryakin rewarding their untiring mounts with occasional hump-pattings which the camels seemed to appreciate, for it caused them to move at a slightly faster pace. They were quite different from fast-stepping horses, however, and though they could outdistance the wind in speed under the goadings of desert raiders they seemed to prefer to move in much more leisurely fashion.

The twilight which preceded the coming of darkness was of short duration, and before an hour had passed the sky was sprinkled with stars and a crescent moon had made its appearance amidst fleecy clouds close to the desert's rim.

They continued on for another hour, with Solo and Kuryakin slightly in the lead. Then, abruptly, Sun Lin halted his camel and pointed out across the sand to where a gigantic ridge of stone bisected the desert.

"It is near this spot that the American you seek was last seen," Sun Lin said.

"FOR MILES the landscape has been featureless," Napoleon Solo said. "And now we run into some thing like this, a rock formation that looks as if it had dropped down out of the sky with a *Made on Mars* label on it."

"It looks more like one of those rugged lunar landscapes we've been getting moon-probe photographs of," Kuryakin said. "It's honeycombed with caverns, but they can't be very large. Just pitted indentations, I'd say. The entire structure can't be more than a hundred feet in length."

"Do you suppose it actually did fall from the sky?" Solo said. "A meteor that large may have landed on Earth more than once. There was that Siberian one that splintered into fragments and shook up about a third of Russia."

Illya shook his head. "I don't think it's anything but a natural Gobi rock formation," he said. "It's only slightly weather-eroded, you'll notice, with no blasted out surfaces."

"Anything is possible in the Gobi. Is that what you're trying to say? I'm beginning to feel you could be right. In a legend-haunted desert—"

Illya Kuryakin smiled wryly. "Actually, there's nothing geologically unusual about a big rock castle in a desert that's as vast as the Gobi. It could be just a mountain that got tired of fighting its way up through ten or twelve million tons of sand when the earth was young."

"There's a lesson in that for us," Solo said. "We can't afford to get tired so early in the game. Tomorrow or the next day a sandstorm could bury us, along with every trace of what we came here to find."

"Right," Illya agreed. "Maybe we should start searching right now."

"It will be less of a risk in the morning," Solo said. "Everything will stand out clearly and sharply. And we're practically out on our feet. There's only one right way to start a search when the time factor isn't of primary

importance. The slow, careful way, skipping nothing, going over every inch of the ground."

"I guess you're right," Illya said. "I'll help Sun Lin and his boys get the tents unrolled. Otherwise it will take them half the night."

Pitching camp for the night in a desert waste was the opposite of a simple task. This Solo had discovered for himself several times in the past. His admiration for Sun Lin and that tireless oriental's two companions was boundless as he watched the swift and efficient way the tent poles were taken down from the camels, the canvas stretched out on the sand, the sleeping mats inspected for the possible presence of vermin and shaken out in the windless air.

His admiration increased when Sun Lin took barely five minutes to get the camels bedded down for the night in a comfortable hollow in the sand. Then the tents went up and that, too, was a gratifying thing to watch when aching bones and throbbing temples made six or seven hours of sleep a luxury to be prized.

The entire task took about twenty minutes in all and it was surprising how much like a miniature tent city the entire arrangement looked. Just two tents, four drowsy camels and several wooden stakes driven in a circle into the sand gave the camp site a community look which was pleasant to contemplate with the moonlight shining down.

Neither Solo nor Kuryakin spent more than two or three minutes wrapped in contemplation, however, for they were out on their feet. Just crawling on their hands and knees into the cool interior of a tent and flopping down on sleeping mats seemed the wisest thing to do.

Five minutes after they had drawn the tent flap shut behind them they were sleeping soundly.

EIGHT

VIOLENCE IN THE SMALL HOURS

IT WAS not a gunshot which awakened them. It was a scream, agonized, prolonged, a scream that went on and on.

They awoke in total darkness, with no knowledge of the time, hearing only the scream shattering the silence of the night.

Solo was the first to leap to his feet, tighten the belt of his tropical shorts and rush out into the night, stopping only for an instant to give Kuryakin a resounding slap on the shoulder and shout a warning, on the off chance that he had not come fully awake.

But Illya was awake enough, and it took him only an instant to snatch a round of ammunition down from the tent pole and strap a holstered gun to his waist, a precaution which Solo had been in too much of a hurry to take.

The instant he emerged from the tent he saw that Napoleon Solo had already crossed the wide stretch of sand which separated the tent from the long rock structure which they had encircled in puzzlement before turning in for the night and was struggling with someone about his own height who had thrown one arm about his neck and was making a frantic effort to drag him to the sand.

Knowing that Solo was unarmed and that the struggling figure might well be clasping a knife made Illya break into a run without stopping to upholster his gun.

That his fear was justified he saw before he had crossed half of the intervening distance, for the sudden glint of moonlight on steel was unmistakable. The knife flashed twice and each flash was accompanied by a downward thrust of the attacking figure's left arm. Solo groaned loudly and fell to one knee. But he was almost instantly on his feet again, fighting desperately to keep the knife at arm's length.

Illya managed to get his gun out of its holster as he ran. But the two men were so entangled now that to risk a shot at Solo's assailant would have

been the height of folly. But still he kept the weapon, a .38 calibre special, leveled and ready, his forefinger on the safety catch.

He crashed into the man just as his arm was going up for the third time, and Solo had started to sag, his right sleeve drenched with blood.

Reversing the pistol, Illya Kuryakin brought the butt-end down with violence on the maniacal knife-wielder's skull. But the knife continued to rise, the hand that held it thrusting upward with a violent jerk that carried the weapon high into the air. Then the man's arm fell back to his side and the knife dropped to the sand. He crashed down on top of it, rolled over and lay still.

His face, in the moonlight, was ghastly, the jaw sagging, the lips split in a half-idiotic grin. It was Chin Husan.

Solo was still on his feet, clutching his right arm as he swayed. "Sun Lin has been killed and that poor devil got the idea into his head that we're in some way responsible. He kept telling me that while he tried his best to kill me. He went crazy because of something he saw. I hope you didn't crack his skull."

"I hope so too, if he really was off his noggin and not just lying to you," Illya said.

"He'd have no reason to lie," Solo said, still clutching his arm. "Nothing else could have made him slash at me that way. He had a wild look in his eyes."

"Your arm," Illya said. "How bad is it?"

"I'll live," Solo said, wryly. "Just a ribbon of skin sliced away. But if he hadn't missed with his first try it could have been real bad."

"You're bleeding like a pig. You'd better get a bandage on it fast."

"I'll get around to it. But first we're going to have a look at what's on the other side of this big ridge of stone."

"What do you expect to find?"

"Sun Lin, crushed, battered to a pulp. And some strange markings in the sand all around him."

"He told you all that while he was doing his best to plunge a knife into your heart?"

Solo nodded. "He was chattering away every second."

They didn't see horror until they were almost upon it, for despite the brightness of the moonlight, much of the rock structure was in shadows. Sun Lin had been a small man in life and the terrible violence that had been done to him made him seem even more inconspicuous in death. His ribcage was completely crushed, his limbs so flattened they resembled gruesome traceries made with a stick on the sand.

Not only was the dead man's clothing torn, it had a singed look, as if the tatters into which they had been ripped had passed through a sheet of flame. The head lolled and there was a deep gash at the base of the oddly discolored neck.

"Crushed to death," Illya Kuryakin muttered, more shaken than he would have cared to admit. "That's what you said, wasn't it? What could have inflicted such injuries?"

The moonlight seemed to shift a little as he spoke, causing the shadows to lengthen and change shape.

Solo shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "We must have had a visitor in the night."

Sweat stood out on Illya's brow. He moved a little away from the corpse, his eyes sweeping the sand within a ten foot radius. Suddenly he seemed to remember something else that Napoleon Solo had repeated as coming from the lips of the deranged man who had tried to kill him, for he bent to examine more closely a huge, circular indentation in the sand.

"There are more of those markings," Solo said, as if aware of his thoughts. "Over there—look."

He gestured toward a wider expanse of sand a few yards to the right of him. The moonlight brought into sharp relief two deep, crater-like depressions in the sand, perfectly circular and set fairly far apart.

"They don't look like footprints," Illya said, following the direction of his gaze. "Only a giant could have made prints that large and they're perfectly round. It's as if—" He hesitated. "It's almost as if he were on stilts. The giant, I mean. A giant walking on stilts and trampling Sun Li into the sand. Crushing and killing him."

"Would you care to put that into a report?" Solo asked, a look of grim reproach in his eyes. "A tank passing over him would be a more sensible guess."

"But we didn't hear a sound," Illya said. "Except, of course, that scream. Just the fact that Chin Husan was screaming loudly enough to wake the dead—"

Kuryakin stopped, puzzled by the look which Solo continued to train on him.

"What makes you think it was Chin Husan who screamed?" Solo asked.

"I naturally thought, when the screaming stopped, and I saw you struggling with him—"

"Chin Husan didn't make a sound until he closed with me," Solo said. "Then he started chattering wildly about what he'd just seen. It was Sun Lin who screamed. I'm sure of it."

"Well, it fits," Illya conceded. "I hope I'll never have to listen to a scream like that again."

"Or see what Sun Lin saw coming toward him across the desert before the life was crushed out of him. If that's what you're thinking I'm with you one

hundred percent."

"I'm not sure that's what I'm thinking," Illya said. "I'm not sure of anything, except that he could hardly have just stumbled and crushed in his ribs and broken his neck and slashed himself up in a dozen places."

"We have a witness," Solo said. "Just the fact that Chin Husan ran amuck like a Malay on the deck of an Indian Ocean freighter for a minute or two doesn't mean the aberration is going to last. If you didn't fracture his skull —"

"A gentle tap wouldn't have stopped him from sinking that knife in your ribs," Illya said. "It was nothing that could be helped. There's a first aid kit in the duffel bag Lin Sun tossed into the tent just before we dozed off. You'd better bandage your arm before you collapse."

"You can say that again," Solo grunted. "All right. We may as well get back to the tent. It will do Chin Husan no harm to rest up a bit."

It took them longer than they had anticipated to cross the level stretch of sand between the rock structure and the tent, because they made the mistake —or perhaps it wasn't a mistake—of glancing toward the hollow where the camels were supposed to be sleeping.

The camels were gone. Not only had all five of the animals vanished, but the tent which the three orientals had shared had been taken down and there was no sign anywhere of Nieh Huang.

They halted abruptly in their tracks and stared across the empty expanse of desert with a chill foreboding. It might have come as less of a shock if there had been some way of making sure, right at that instant, that Nieh Huang had not robbed them of everything but the clothes on their backs. Tropical shorts and one gun were hardly survival-level safeguards in the middle of the Gobi.

Fortunately so absolute a disaster had not taken place, as they discovered when they continued on to the tent, and found all of their personal belongings intact.

It was the portable shortwave transmitter which Solo seized upon first, inspecting it carefully to make sure that it had not been tampered with.

"We'll have to signal the 'copter to pick us up," Solo said. "Without camels or replacements for Sun Lin and Nieh Huang we can't do any more exploring on foot, that for sure. I might be willing to risk it with just one guide and one camel between us. But I can't see Chin Husan as that guide. And we have not got one camel. Why did he have to take our camels? That's what I can't understand."

"Maybe he didn't," Kuryakin said. "Maybe they became frightened and took advantage of Sun Lin's failure to tie them up. Ordinarily a camel doesn't have to be tied up for the night. But if they saw whatever it was that trampled Sun Lin to death—"

"We'll have to signal the 'copter," Solo said. "We have no choice. It won't prevent us from searching this particular spot more thoroughly—for a few hours, at least, while the chopper stands by. But another day's journey over the sand is definitely out. If that still seems a worthwhile gamble we'll have to return to the coast, engage some new guides and arrange for them to meet us here when the 'copter sets us down for the second time."

"Does that appeal to you?" Illya said. "It doesn't to me."

"It's what Waverly would expect us to do," Solo reminded him soberly.

Illya's eyes widened, looking at Solo's still unbandaged arm. "You haven't even taken a good look at that wound," he said. "Don't tell me it's just a scratch. In a climate like this infection can set in fast."

"I did take a look," Solo said. "While we were rounding that long ridge of rock. It's not a scratch, exactly. But it's nothing to be alarmed about."

It took Solo less than five minutes to dress and bandage the wound but Illya could see that he made a thorough job of it.

Kuryakin kept looking toward the tent flap and there was no need for him to speculate as to the reason for Solo's haste, for he kept talking as he drew the

bandage tight.

"Chin Husan has either regained consciousness by now or he'll be needing the kind of medical aid this kit can't supply. I'm not sure I shouldn't have let my arm go until—"

Illya shook his head. "Antiseptic should have been poured on that wound before this. You took a dangerous risk in not stopping the bleeding at once."

"All right," Solo said. "But let's get moving. We don't want Chin Husan to vanish into the desert before we have a chance to talk to him. He's had plenty of time to get up and go staggering off."

"I hope the blow sobered him and he can talk rationally," Illya said.

"If he can talk at all," Solo said. "Right now, that's the only thing I'm concerned about."

There was a faint flush of dawn on the desert's rim far to the east when they emerged from the tent and moved toward the rock structure—more cautiously now. Despite the faint dawn glow the desert was much darker than it had been ten minutes earlier, for the moon had passed behind a cloud and the stars supplied very little light.

They could not make out more than the vague outlines of the rock structure and if Chin Husan still lay where he had fallen there was no possibility of confirming it until they had advanced within a few feet of where the struggle had taken place.

Solo drew in his breath sharply when he saw the huddled form swaying back and forth on the sand. He gestured Illya back, and went on alone until Chin Husan's harsh breathing brought him to a cautious halt.

NINE

THE FIRE DEMON

PERSUADING A wildly terrified man who had just regained consciousness to be calm proved more difficult than Napoleon Solo had thought it would.

It was made more difficult by the fact that Chin Husan, deprived of his reason by what he had seen, had directed all of his rage against Solo in a wholly irrational way. Despite the restoration of his sanity, a little of that rage remained and the very firmness of Solo's hand on his arm threatened to bring all of it back again.

Luckily Chin Husan seemed to quiet down a little after considerable firmness had been applied and enough reassuring words had been poured into his ear. He continued to struggle, but less violently and he stopped completely when Illya said: "We are your friends, do you understand? We were Sun Lin's friends as well, both Mr. Solo and myself. We had nothing whatever to do with his death.

"A great anger came upon you and you stabbed Mr. Solo in the arm. It may have been because you saw Sun Lin die and we are strangers here, and you could not completely trust us. Is that what you thought? That we were in some way to blame for the terrible thing that happened to your friend?"

Chin Husan remained utterly motionless for an instant, as if a part of what Illya had said was bewildering to him, and he did not quite know what to say in reply. Then a convulsive shudder seized him, and he spoke with a quaver in his voice, his clawlike hands in rapid motion, as if he were dry-washing them.

"I do not remember—stabbing Mr. Solo in the arm. But when the Fire Demon goes walking in the desert there are many things which are best forgotten. We were as close as brothers but when the Fire Demon came for my brother it was only my own worthless life I prized. I ran very fast, but my head keep turning, turning—and I saw him die."

"Just how did he die, Chin?" Solo said. "Try to remember. Did you ever see the Fire Demon before?"

"Everyone has seen the Fire Demon," Chin Husan said. "He is as old as the human race."

"And he killed Sun Lin? With fire?"

Chin Husan shook his head. "Not with fire, no. He is all fire, but shaped like a man. Out of his mouth, ears, nostrils there comes nothing but fire. But it is not a fire that burns. He goes walking in the desert and he walks over you and—you die."

Illya Kuryakin gripped Solo's arm and whispered into his ear. "This is madness, of course. But he must have seen something that looked like a fiery giant. If you keep on questioning him we may get at the truth."

Solo nodded and tightened his grip on Chin Husan's arm. "Listen to me, Chin," he said. "What you have told us is very strange. We believe you, of course, but you have not told us why the Fire Demon goes walking in the desert. Why did he kill Sun Lin and spare you?"

"He did not spare me. I ran. He walked away into the darkness without seeing me at all."

"How do you know he didn't see you? Doesn't he have eyes?"

"He has eyes that look out across the world and ears that hear the whisper of the wind as it moves across the ocean a thousand miles away. To the Fire Demon we are too small to be seen unless he bends down and searches for us in the sand. When you walk through a forest there are thousands of insects which you hear but do not see. But if they are silent you neither see or hear them. I was silent when I ran."

"How long have the tribesmen of the Gobi thought of the Fire Demon in that way?" Solo asked, a rising excitement in his voice.

There was no change in Chin's voice when he said: "I do not know."

"I think you do," Solo said. "This is very important to us, Chin. It is something we must know. Your friends, your brothers—did they always think of the Fire Demon in that way?"

"In what way? I do not understand."

"As having eyes that can see what is taking place a great distance away. Do you know what a legend is, Chin?"

"I have heard your countrymen talk about legends," Chin Husan said. "For us there are no legends. We only believe in what is true."

"And the Fire Demon is true."

"I have said that he is."

"I'm afraid you may not understand me when I tell you that the Fire Demon is an ancient Chinese legend which goes back thousands of years, and he has been pictured as a—well, a kind of idol fifteen or twenty feet tall, walking about and breathing fire just as you've described him. But even if you don't completely understand I'd like you to think about it for a minute or two."

"I am an unlearned man. Is that what you're thinking?" Chin Husan said, with a trace of resentment in his voice. "It may be true, but why do you fling it in my face? I know what you are talking about."

"I'm sorry," Solo said. "But if you understand I am glad, because it makes it that much simpler. You know what the Fire Demon looks like. But when you say he can 'look out across the world' did you always think of him as being able to do that? As a child, I mean. And do your friends all think he can do that too? For how long, Chin? Since they were very young?"

"I do not think so," Chin Husan said. "It is very strange. When I was young the Fire Demon could see all of us. So we believed, and that is why we hoped we would never meet him walking in the desert.

"He can still see us if we make a noise and he looks down and searches for us. But how he looks far away and what he sees we cannot see at all. And what he hears we cannot hear at all."

The moon had come into clear view again and was bathing the rock structure in its departing radiance, which shone full upon Chin Husan's face. It brought his features into harsh relief and Solo suddenly realized that,

even now, they were not the features of a completely sane man. There was a look of torment in his eyes and he seemed to be directing his guilt feelings in upon himself, for abruptly he raised his right fist and pounded his chest as if punishing himself for his cowardice in deserting Sun Lin.

Solo felt himself to be in no danger of another sudden attack. His concern was solely for Chin Husan's sanity and the harm which a half-demented man could do to himself if abruptly released from all restraint.

Chin Husan could hardly have been aware of what was passing through Solo's mind. But if he had known his sudden bid for freedom could not have been more violent or taken the two men from U.N. C.L.E. more completely by surprise.

With a display of wiry strength amazing in so old a man he wrenched both of his wrists free and left the moon-splotched shadows where he had been huddling in a flying leap.

The leap carried him straight out over the sand, and was executed with so great a violence that it sent him sprawling. But almost instantly he was on his feet again, running wildly across the desert in the direction of the hollow where the vanished camels had spent the major part of the night. He encircled the hollow and ran on without looking back or uttering a sound.

ILLYA SEEMED the most shaken. "Who could have anticipated he'd try something like that?" Solo muttered. "His madness came back fast."

"Do you think we should go after him?" Kuryakin said.

"Only if we were as mad as he is," Solo said. "Then getting lost in the desert wouldn't matter much, one way or the other. He won't stop running for quite some time. We can search for him when the 'copter gets here, if he's still alive."

"Why don't you come right out and say it," Illya asked. "If *we're* still alive. Signaling the 'copter is going to be the first real test. If THRUSH can pick up a short wave, limited range message in triple-code in the middle of the

Gobi Blakeley's disappearance may be followed by another vanishing act—staged by Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin."

"A THRUSH pickup of a transmitted SOS might be wholly unnecessary to accomplish that," Solo said. "You're forgetting that when Huntley and Rivers discussed something their voices on the headland and the two telecasts we saw in New York must have been picked up almost instantaneously, by some spot-coverage transmission mechanism that verges on the miraculous."

"But Newfoundland isn't quite as remote from the THRUSH-cell network as the middle of the Gobi," Illya reminded him.

"How do we know how remote the bedrock bottom of a Pacific Island volcano might be from some nightmare kind of eavesdropping mechanism?" Solo said. "The same kind of pickup impossibility may be at work here, changing it into the opposite of an impossibility. Could spoken words be picked up electronically half across the world? Think a moment before you rule that out. Television in its most primitive form was considered just as great an impossibility at the turn of the century."

He paused an instant, then went on grimly. "I've a feeling also that right now, for us, that pickup mechanism wouldn't have to be globe-encircling, that we're very close to its mysterious source. That's why I questioned Chin Husan so closely about the Fire Demon. His answers didn't tell me one-tenth of what I'd like to know. But they made something clearer I've given a great deal of thought to. In case you're interested, it's also on the nightmare level."

They heard the helicopter before they saw it. It was still high in the sky and approaching from the east. For three full minutes they continued to hear it before it came into view as a tiny black dot against the dawn glow.

Gradually the dot grew larger and as it began to descend its aspect changed from that of an airborne gnat to a huge and ungainly insect with dangling appendages. Growing larger still it lost its insect-like appearance and became a flying windmill. Finally its whirlybird contours stood out

distinctly. The cockpit glimmered in the dawn light and the metal helmets of the two pilots glittered with a diamond-like brilliance.

The helicopter was less than four hundred feet to the east of them now, and descending quite rapidly. But it had not quite reached a hovering position and seemed to be moving with a puzzling lack of stability. Solo thought for a moment that the pilots had manipulated the controls with insufficient precision high in the sky, and were endeavoring to correct a miscalculation that would have carried the 'copter a considerable distance beyond the tent area.

But it was hard to believe that pilots so experienced could have committed such a blunder, and his alarm increased when the 'copter began to sway and lurch violently.

It never reached a hovering position directly overhead. Instead it dipped with appalling suddenness, shot off at a tangent to its original course and went into so fast a vertical spin that its outlines became blurred for an instant.

It was still revolving when two sharp blasts put an end to the spinning, and a bright sheet of flame spurted skyward, accompanied by a billowing cloud of smoke.

Half the 'copter was aflame when it began to fall, with an incredible slowness at first and then with a speed that no aircraft less massive could have attained after being blasted down in midair.

It crashed to earth a hundred yards from where Solo and Kuryakin were standing, sending another sheet of flame spiraling skyward. So violent was the impact that a small earthquake seemed to pass over the desert, hurling them to the sand and stinging their nostrils with a spattering of micro-bullets composed entirely of sand.

When they struggled to their feet a pillar of smoke was arising from the shattered 'copter, laced with darting tongues of flame. But one of the pilots had managed to escape from the wreckage and was running straight toward them cross the sand.

It was difficult to imagine how he could have survived so fiery a holocaust with no more than a soot-scorched face and a slight limp which slowed him down a little as he ran. But in some miraculous way he had not only extricated himself from the wreckage, but had suffered no injuries in the crash crippling enough to keep him from outdistancing the swiftly spreading flames.

He was gesturing to them as he ran, as if he had something to tell them of such vital importance that not even the terrible ordeal of struggling to save himself in time could blot it from his mind.

Illya Kuryakin was still too stunned by what had happened to move from where he stood. But Solo, while almost as stunned, managed to stagger forward until the distance between the advancing pilot an U.N.C.L.E.'S Number One operative had been considerably reduced.

"You're safe now," Solo shouted. "Better slow down or you'll be flat on your face. Even if another explosion comes—"

"That's what it was, an explosion!" the advancing pilot shouted, not heeding Solo's advice. "But it wasn't a flash-fire accident. We were fired upon!"

But that's impossible Solo thought, coming to an abrupt halt and waiting for the now slightly swaying man to join him. His waiting was in vain, because the runner's swaying increased and he began to lurch back and forth across the sand as erratically as the 'copter had done before the explosion had sent it crashing to the earth in flames.

There was a sudden, blinding flash and the running pilot rose eight feet into the air and went spinning back toward the still flaming wreckage. He screamed just once, piercingly, his lips writhing back from his teeth.

Solo could not see what it was that was bearing him backwards. But his face, where the soot had not blackened it, was a livid mask of terror, and it was easy to see that he was experiencing as well an al most unendurable agony.

There was another sudden flash and the pilot's spinning body flew apart in the air, as if some invisible force had shattered it. Instantly, gruesomely, severing the arms from the trunk, the legs at the knees, and causing the head to split open like a coconut dropped from a tree.

What was 1eft the body thudded to the sand a short distance from the wreckage and was almost as instantly enveloped in a swirl of smoke that continued on past it over the sand until it was half way to where Solo was standing.

For an instant he had to fight against a threat he could not remember ever having experienced before—the danger of actually blacking out from shock alone. It did not surprise him too much. To witness so ghastly an execution at close range, with no warning, no chance at all to summon a danger-conditioned fortitude to one's aid held a degree of horror that made such a threat very real.

In the vicinity of the wreckage the desert was strewn with still flaming debris, and the heat could be felt from where Napoleon Solo stood. But it wasn't the heat that caused him to take a few steps backward and blink furiously. It was the towering figure that had come suddenly into view a half mile beyond the wreckage, its vast bulk silhouetted against the sky and half blotting out the blazing sunlight.

It was moving slowly toward the wreckage. It was ablaze with many-colored lights which even the downstreaming sunlight failed to dim. It had an unmistakably oriental look. The arms were bent sharply at the elbows and were held well out from a body that seemed divided into segments that overlapped.

What looked like a gigantic stone turban enveloped the upper part of a head which was sharply angular and gleamed with a metallic luster as it swayed slowly back and forth.

Clearly Illya Kuryakin had seen it too, for Solo was aware of the younger man's harsh breathing a little to the left of him, and could hear the swish of his sandals as he moved about on the sand.

Gradually, as he stared, the figure grew dimmer, as if the newly arisen sun resented its presence and was reaching out with long arms of radiance to blot it from sight. It seemed to merge and blend with the sunlight as it went walking into the east.

TEN

THREE DESERT MAIDENS

THE HEAT was intolerable and the sun was a blazing red eye that seemed to follow Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin as they dragged themselves over the sand. Not only had they lost their way in the desert—they had started out with no knowledge of what Sun Lin could have told them if he had been still alive. The Gobi was a man-killer.

Its monotony stripped it of all guideposts. Just as you felt you might be on the track of something—the recovered trail of a camel, perhaps—what you thought might be hoof-marks in parallel formation turned out to be wind-flurry indentations.

There were no big mirages to mislead them. Just little ones that were infinitely more misleading. They became illusion-tormented in slow stages. There would be moments when they seemed to be caressed by cool winds, encouraged by what they were quite sure were distant but encouraging voices, urging them not to abandon hope, promising them a reward for their efforts.

Illya was the first to collapse. He did it without complaining, without uttering a single word of protest. He simply stopped dragging himself forward, sank level with the sand and lay still. Solo blacked out a few minutes later.

* * *

THREE DESERT maidens, their faces veiled in morning mist, were tripping lightly over the Gobi sands. Three desert maidens, arm in arm, their

long yellow robes flowing out over the sand.

Only—there was something wrong. All three of the maidens looked exactly alike. They had the same eyes, the same high cheek bones, the same facial pallor.

Solo had seen each of the three faces—or one face—before. But not in the Gobi. Somewhere far away in another world. But how could three Gobi maidens look so enchantingly beautiful, when behind them loomed gray buildings that had nothing whatever to do with the Gobi and should not have been there at all?

Tall gray buildings and hurrying New York faces tight with strain. A long gray limousine moving slowly through a canyon of stone. Against such a background, how could three lovely maidens maintain their poise and trip so gracefully over the sand? How could their faces fail to mirror something of that same strain?

"Wake up, Napoleon Solo," a voice that was all music seemed to whisper deep in Solo's mind. "This is Lhasa. We meet for the second time, under circumstances which have greatly changed. You have been delirious for hours. But it is important for you to know that many things have changed—so that you will not think that you are in the presence of an enemy."

The voice ceased for an instant, then went on again. "When a man has endured almost more than the human mind can bear, it would be cruel beyond belief to let him go on thinking that he is still in deadly danger. So long as you remain here you will be in danger. But it is not immediate; you are completely safe for the moment. Try to understand that. It will set your mind at rest, and make your awakening less of a torment."

The three desert maidens drew suddenly closer to one another, their linked arms tightening as they danced. And suddenly they seemed to merge and blend, to coalesce and run together until there remained just one enchantingly radiant maiden in a long yellow robe tripping gracefully over the Gobi sand.

Napoleon Solo opened his eyes.

Ebony black and immense was the first object that met his eyes. It towered in one corner of an enormous room in which many screens, set at oblique angles, glowed transparent in the light of a flickering fire. The ebony black object was a statue, and Solo gradually realized it was a somnolent Buddha, with features slightly smiling.

Upon the screens—there were eight of them in all—long red dragons writhed, with their tongues darting fire. There was a brazier directly opposite the Buddha and from its glowing coals a thin ribbon of smoke coiled.

There were rich oriental rugs on the floor and hanging lamps as well which shed a mellow amber radiance over their intricate designs.

"Napoleon Solo, look at me," the voice that was all music pleaded. "At me —not at this room, which pleases my father but gives me no pleasure."

She was kneeling at his side, and since he was on his side, staring straight across the room toward the opposite wall it was not strange that he had failed to be aware of her presence until her voice came to his ears.

Napoleon rolled over on his back and then sideway again until he was staring directly into her eyes. His head whirled for an instant, from weakness or dizziness perhaps, and he had to blink furiously to bring her features into sharp relief.

For an instant the tall gray buildings seemed to come sweeping back, but he knew now that they were solely an illusion and that he was not within walking distance of the United Nations. If he remained calm only the room and the woman at his side would remain.

"You have been out of your mind for hours, Napoleon Solo," she said. "You woke up once, but you did not recognize me. But you must have seen my face in your dreams, for you talked wildly about our meeting in New York.

"It was a tragic meeting and one that I now regret. I threatened you, warned you what would happen to U.N.C.L.E when your every move became known to us in advance."

"But why—"

"Wait," she said, laying two fingers on his lips, and bending so slow above him that her breath fanned his face. "Let me finish and then you can talk. I have much to tell you."

She paused an instant, her eyes almost feverishly bright. "My father you saw on New York," she went on quickly. "He is Lee Cheng. But he is not a THRUSH agent."

The name was unfamiliar to Solo but it brought an instant question to his lips. "Lee Chang—your father? You mean that frail little man who turned and fled back toward the car when I was forced to make sure that you were not carrying a concealed weapon? The other two were not old enough—"

"He is neither frail nor little in his mind. He invented what you have come to the Gobi to investigate and, if possible, destroy. It is a machine that can move about in the desert and pick up what is said and done by an isolated human target thousands of miles away. It can penetrate all wails, listen and record what has been said and send televisual images just as far."

Lhasa's voice took on a more vibrant intensity. "It is—yes, a kind of Frankenstein monster. Soulless, lifeless, except for the terrible kind of artificial life that my father has endowed it with. Nothing remotely like it has ever been developed before. It is a machine of a thousand eyes, a thousand ears. And my father would use it to dominate and enslave the world and restore the ancient glories of our race. There should be no need for me to remind you how great was the glory of China thousands of years before Western civilizations rose and fell."

"But if your father—"

"Wait," she insisted, her voice suddenly almost pleading. "I have more to tell you. There is little about you that I do not know, Napoleon Solo. I watched you often through the all-seeing eyes of that machine, both before we met in New York and afterwards. Sometimes I could not see you at all, because it goes blind at times, completely blind, and records nothing that

my father and THRUSH would like it to see and hear. Deaf and blind. It happens often. But my father is working night and day to perfect it."

"Your father and THRUSH. But you just said that he was not a THRUSH agent."

"I asked you to be patient, to hear me out. If you will listen, you will understand. Your battle so far has been entirely with THRUSH. And your suspicions have not been wide of the mark. THRUSH is making use of my father's invention in an attempt to destroy U.N.C.L.E and increase its criminal power a hundredfold. But THRUSH does not know what my father's secret plans are. When the right time comes he will supplant THRUSH. He will be the all-powerful one. But now he must pretend that it is quite otherwise. He has always been a poor man and without the support which THRUSH gave him—"

"He has agreed to work with THRUSH to destroy U.N.C.L.E., is that it?" Solo asked.

"Yes, and I have helped him. It is I who have been a THRUSH agent. I am a unit commander, I have been entrusted with important secrets. But all of that is of no consequence when it is balanced against what is happening now."

Solo waited for her to continue, feeling suddenly confident that no further questions would be needed. She was clearly going to tell him everything he had to know. The intensity of her gaze confirmed it and the almost pleading look in her eyes.

"Three things," she went on quickly, "have made it necessary for me to take drastic measures to oppose both THRUSH and my father's secret plans. First, THRUSH no longer trusts me. My failure in New York and my inability to keep you from reaching the Gobi has made them turn against me. The penalty for that kind of failure could be death."

"I see," Solo said, nodding. "And the other two reasons?"

"Do not misjudge me," she said. "I would race death gladly if it would help to save my father. But even if I succeeded in getting THRUSH to go on trusting me, my father's life would still hang in the balance. And the scales are tipping dangerously against him. He had become reckless, headstrong, blind to all caution. He is moving much too fast. If his mask of pretence drops, and it could at any moment, THRUSH will destroy him. Instantly—because to them he is nothing but a pawn. When once his invention is perfected—"

Her hand tightened on Solo's wrist. "His ambition to become the dominant one has made him lose contact with reality. I can no longer advise or control him. My pleadings fall on deaf ears. He is not only working to perfect the electronic monster that U.N.C.L.E. must find a way to destroy—but he has invented another, smaller but just as destructive Frankenstein-like giant. It is solely an instrument of death, for it can send a lethal ray half as far as the televisual pickups that make the larger mechanical giant a civilization-destroying threat. It would be less destructive on a global scale, but it is frightful enough, and he is planning to use it against THRUSH."

"Good God," Solo breathed. "How—how close is he to perfecting it?"

"I do not know," the woman at his side said. "He has kept that a secret, even from me. But I'm convinced that THRUSH may destroy him at any moment. I'm sure they suspect more than he knows, or will allow himself to believe. As I've said, he is deaf and blind to all caution. He has no way of finding out just how much THRUSH suspects when the machine's eavesdropping mechanism breaks down, and that has occurred often."

"Where is this new invention now?" Solo asked. "Is he working on it here?"

The woman at his side nodded. "Yes, right here in the ruins."

"The ruins?"

"We are in the ruins of an ancient Gobi temple," she said. "With money supplied by THRUSH my father has converted it into a series or connecting laboratories and workshops. It was once a holy place. But it is not so holy now, for THRUSH has seen to that. We have had five THRUSH visitors

just in the past month. They fear that what happened in New York may be repeated here. You and your friend Illya Kuryakin outwitted them at every turn. They never thought you would get so far. Your arrival has greatly alarmed them."

The mention of Illya's name made Solo forget everything else for a moment. His concern for the safety of Kuryakin had been continuously on his mind from the first. But he had forced himself to remain silent about it, considering it wiser to wait until the woman at his side had told him enough to convince him that a display of concern would be of more benefit than harm to Illya. A premature question would have been an act of folly and what he had to guard against most of all was changing a talkative woman into a suspiciously silent one.

But now he felt that the question could be safely asked.

"Where is Kuryakin?" he said. "You haven't told me how we got here. If anything has happened to him—"

"I told you that I wished only to set your mind at rest," the woman at his side said, before he could go on. "My father found you both wandering in the desert and had you brought here. You were delirious, raving, barely able to drag yourselves along. It was my father who directed the attack which brought the helicopter which came to your rescue down in flames, from here by remote control. The electronic eavesdropping machine is equipped also with electronic weapons of deadly accuracy and range.

"You would have been killed if it had not stopped functioning shortly after it brought the plane down. That is one of the defects which my father is working night and day to overcome."

Lhasa paused, to stare at him steadily for a moment. "Your friend is safe," she said. "My father is not being too kind to him, because he does not wish to displease THRUSH at this point. There are certain questions he must ask the very stubborn Mr. Kuryakin. But I have protected you from all that, and I intend to go on doing so. My father, whatever he may believe, is not yet all-powerful here." She continued to stare at him steadily, her eyes seeming to veil more than they revealed.

"I said there were three things, Napoleon Solo, that made it necessary for me to take drastic measures to oppose both THRUSH and my father's secret plans. You know now what two of them are. But you have not questioned me about the third."

"And what is the third?" Solo asked.

"I told you that I have watched you often through the all-seeing eyes of the machine, Napoleon Solo. Despite myself I have come to respect and admire you. I will strike a bargain with you. If I can find a way that will enable both you and Mr. Kuryakin to escape from the ruins before it is too late—will you promise me that you will not forget what I have just told you? THRUSH has become my father's enemy? At any moment the blow may fall. The instant they cease to need him he will be destroyed. Only you can save him. If U.N. C.L.E. can strike first my father's life may be spared. Surely if I help you to escape, U.N.C.L.E., out of gratitude alone, would rest content with so shattering a blow to THRUSH."

The proposal was so unexpected that Solo remained for an instant silent, turning it over in his mind. Such a promise, he knew, would have to be conditional. Lee Cheng could not possibly escape the exaction which justice would demand—life imprisonment, at the very least. The frail little man's Frankenstein monster had been used as an instrument of death, and while justice could be tempered with mercy it could not be toppled from its pedestal by bargaining on any level.

Neither was it anything that Solo would have cared to attempt. Lee Cheng's guilt would not be lessened by the repentance of his daughter—if her repentance was genuine—or by her offer of help.

He was very careful to make his answer noncommittal and reassuring. "I'll do my best," he said.

"Then I will do my best," the woman at his side said quickly, a gleam of relief coming into her eyes, "to arrange for your escape. It will be difficult and may take a little time."

Solo was far from sharing her relief. What she had said about Illya was causing him increasing concern. "My father is not being too kind to him" could have meant more than the words suggested. It could have veiled an ordeal by torture that Illya might not be able to withstand.

"There should be no conditions attached to the kind of bargain we have just made," Solo said. "Kuryakin has risked his life more than once to save mine. You can hardly expect me to be unconcerned as to his safety."

"I know," Lhasa said, meeting his gaze with more understanding than he had dared to hope he would see in her eyes. "But what would you have me do? Take you to him? It would be difficult and dangerous. He is under constant guard."

"But you could do it, I think," Solo said. "I would just exchange a few words with him. It's important to me. I must be absolutely sure that he is all right. You just said—"

"I know what I said. But that does not mean that all of the guards will obey me, or even that I can trust more than three of four of them not to betray me. Why can't you believe me when I tell you that Kuryakin is in no immediate danger?"

"That depends on what you mean by danger," Solo said. "He may be in more danger than you know. Not of losing his life perhaps, but—" He let what he could have said remain unspoken.

For an instant Lhasa returned his stare almost defiantly. Then she shrugged. "All right," she said. "I'll take you to him."

ELEVEN

GOBI SOS

IN AMERICA it would not have been thought of as a room, but as a warehouse interior of an arsenal supply depot.

The walls were of stone, but they had an almost metallic sheen and they towered up into shadows. Long benches stood against the walls and one stood a little out from the wall and extended from the doorway to a far corner where a huge pile of miscellaneous objects lay scattered—steel helmets, gun belts, canteens and what looked like a collapsed parachute.

On all of the benches there were metallically gleaming instruments of science. Their technological configuration was apparent at a glance, although some were much larger than others.

But it wasn't the instruments of science, nor the scattered objects of desert warfare equipment that were half-obscured by the shadows that caused Solo to come to an abrupt halt just inside the doorway and draw in his breath sharply. The woman at his side had shut the door firmly behind them and was watching his face intently, as if she feared that just the sight of the half-naked man strapped from his waist to his shoulders by leather thongs to one of the benches might cause Solo to turn upon her in rage.

Illya Kuryakin's back was crisscrossed with swelling welts, and he was moving his shoulders about, as far as the thongs would permit, as if to ease the pain of what could only have been recently applied lashes.

"You lied to me!" Solo breathed. "You said that no harm would come to him."

"I did not know," she said, "that my father would—"

Lhasa straightened abruptly, a look of alarm coming into her eyes. They had both heard it, a sudden, clattering sound just outside the door that had barely closed behind them.

"That guard!" she said. "I'm not sure I can trust him. I did not like the look he gave me when I ordered him to leave. He may be waiting just outside. I'd better make sure—"

She had opened the door again and was gone before Napoleon Solo could move across the enormous room toward Illya Kuryakin.

"There's a bolt on that door!" Illya cried out sharply. "Lower it into place. Don't let her come back. Hurry! We'll never get another chance."

It seemed sheer madness to Solo, for what chance could two unarmed men possibly have in a room that was securely bolted? But he turned, grasped the bolt firmly and let it clatter into place, then crossed the enormous room in ten swift strides to Illya's side.

"Unbind me," Illya said, ignoring the appalled look on Solo's face as his eyes came to rest on the ten or twelve long red welts that crisscrossed the younger agent's back. They had cut deeply into the flesh, and it was easy to see from the tight set of Illya's lips that the pain was still agonizing.

"There's a powerful transmitting apparatus at the end of this bench," Kuryakin said. "Get me loose and we'll put through a message to Harris in Tokyo and Waverly in New York. It won't be picked up, because Lee Cheng's metal giant is lying immobilized in the desert close to where it brought the 'copter down. It developed another defect right after we caught a brief look at it."

Solo began swiftly to loosen the thongs which bound Illya to the bench, talking as he did so, his voice tight with strain.

"How did you find out all that? I had a very good chance to get some information just as vital, but I seem to have muffed it. Cheng's daughter—"

"She's a very talkative girl," Illya said. "But I guess you know that. She was here, along with her father. He finally lost patience and presented me with a souvenir of this place I'll be carrying with me for some time. Twelve lashes, straight across the back, with a very ugly cat. But trying to get vital information out of a man that way can backfire. He had to give me some information so that I could fil1 in the rest of it for him, which of course I refused to do."

For an instant Illya's lips twisted in a wry smile, despite his pain. "He thought it was safe enough to let a few things slip out, because he didn't think I'd ever leave this room alive."

"Are you sure you will?" Solo asked. "Even if we get a message through to Tokyo and New York, there's a long road of winding before any help could get here."

"That's what Lhasa said," Illya replied, the smile returning to his lips for the barest instant before the last thong fell away. "She's quite a girl. More loyal to her father than to THRUSH. But for awhile, apparently, THRUSH didn't begin to suspect that.

"She took command in New York, but her father's danger made her turn against THRUSH."

"Lhasa," Solo said. "I didn't even think to ask her her name. Did she say she respected and admired you too?"

"To some extent. But think nothing of it. It goes with that kind of talkativeness, when there's something of importance to be gained by it."

"That's what you think," Solo said. "All right, we'll send those messages. First to Harris and then to Waverly. Maybe they can tell us something we don't know—that will give us a straw to clutch at. We could sure use one. They'll be clattering at that door any minute now."

Illya nodded and swayed a little as he moved toward the end of the bench. Solo saw the transmitting apparatus then, for the first time. It was huge and looked powerful. He hoped that it was as powerful as it looked.

"You know how to operate it, of course."

"I don't think I'll have any trouble," Kuryakin said. "It's stripped down and looks efficient. I imagine it has a very powerful beam. Would you like to send the messages?"

"It's all yours," Solo said. "But for God's sake be quick about it."

It took Illya Kuryakin only a minute to groove it to the right wavelength. Once it was grooved in, the ground pulses began to operate continuously and Harris' voice in Tokyo came in precisely two minutes later.

Illya spoke briefly for another minute, filling Harris in as completely as that brief time interval permitted and what Harris said in reply Solo could not hear. He could only hope that it wasn't too tragically depressing.

Kuryakin turned briefly to nod at Solo. "Now Waverly," he said. "What I just heard will rock you back on your heels."

Solo could only hope that it wasn't an exaggeration.

For two or three more minutes Illya remained bent over the transmitting apparatus. His hand had moved again swiftly and had then remained stationary.

Suddenly he turned from the instrument and shook his head. "I can't contact Waverly," he said. "He's not in the office or anywhere in the building. But there was no real need for me to try and get him, in view of what Harris told me. Rescue is on the way, if we can hold out until it gets here." '

"But that makes no sense to me," Solo said. "How could such a thing be possible? The 'copter—"

"It was blasted down and you thought that U.N.C.L.E had no further resources at its command in the Gobi. But that's where you're mistaken. Do you think Harris would have sent us here with no replacements?"

"You mean he didn't tell us?"

"There are some things Waverly apparently seems to feel it's wise to keep a secret, even from Napoleon Solo," Illya said. "He told Harris but not us. Another U.N. C.L.E. 'copter is on its way here, yes. And it's carrying a bomb load we can drop on Lee Cheng's eavesdropping giant. If—and it's a big 'if', of course—we can stay alive until it gets here."

"But how did they know where we were?" Solo asked. "If they've started out already—"

"Harris says it was easy. U.N.C.L.E.'s Tokyo unit picked up a telecast from the giant, precisely as U.N.C.L.E in the United States picked up that

Newfoundland telecast. An erratic, very short, freak telecast. Right after it blew another electronic tube, perhaps for the hundredth time."

Kuryakin smiled grimly. "They even saw us dragging ourselves over the sand and collapsing. Then the giant collapsed and the telecast flickered out."

"If we can stay alive until the 'copter gets here," Solo said. "That's a big order."

"It may not be too big to fill," Illya said. "If we keep our wits about us. What do you suppose is keeping Lhasa from coming back? I'd give a lot to know."

The sudden rattling of the door made it almost seem as if Illya's words had been overheard by some mysterious imp of the perverse bent on startling them.

Solo swung about, strode to the door and unlatched it. He opened it only a few inches. But when he saw Lhasa's pale, agitated face framed in the aperture he opened it wide enough to admit her, then quickly closed and latched it again.

She remained for an instant close to the door, staring at Solo and Illya with a stricken look on her face. "My father knows," she said. "That guard betrayed me. He also knows you sent two scrambled messages to Tokyo and New York. There's a recording device attached to the transmitter. He has the messages, but that combined range-finder and recorder just reproduced what you said without unscrambling it. And what was said to you from Tokyo. How long should it take him to unscramble both messages?"

"Not more than ten minutes," Solo said. "They were not coded messages. Kuryakin spoke directly to our agent in Tokyo. But there was some scrambling, which was straightened out instantly at the other end. It may take your father a little longer, unless the recording device has some very specialized instruments."

"There's probably nothing he hasn't got," Illya muttered. He moved quickly to Lhasa's side and gripped her by the arm. "Your father will be here the instant he unscrambles those messages," he said. "Is that what you're trying to tell us?"

"Yes, and he will not spare you," Lhasa cried, the wild look that had been absent for a moment returning to her eyes. He will kill you both. He killed your Mr. Blakeley over there by that table." She gestured wildly. "I did my best to protect him, as I would have protected Napoleon Solo. But he was just as stubborn and reckless. He insulted my father to his face—"

Lhasa stared at Solo. "You must go before it is too late. There may still be time. My father still trusts me, although not as completely as before. I lied to him explained that I had reason to believe that if you were together here for a few minutes your conversation would be worth recording. He knows how skilled I am at eavesdropping and I think he believed me. But I can't be sure."

She swung about abruptly and pointed toward the shadowed corner where the desert warfare equipment had been piled up.

"There are several holstered pistols there," she said. "Strap two of them to your waist. As soon as you are in the inner courtyard start running—straight through the outer courtyard into the desert. You may be stopped, but it is a chance you must take. I would have planned your escape quite differently if I had had just a few hours—"

She paused an instant, then went on breathlessly. "The temple is in ruins. There are crumbling blocks of stone everywhere, a protection against bullets if you weave about and move in and out of the shadows."

Solo nodded and strode quickly to the equipment-cluttered corner of the enormous room. He picked up a gun-belt, strapped it to his waist and hurled another toward Illya Kuryakin, who had moved almost as quickly into the shadows.

Illya caught it and lost no time in buckling it around his slender hips.

Lhasa had unbolted the door and was standing a little to the left of it when they returned across the room to her side.

"You must hurry," she warned.

Solo had unbolted the door and was passing into the stone-walled passageway beyond when she clutched him firmly by the arm.

"Remember your promise," she pleaded. "My father is lost to all reason now. His death will be certain unless the destruction of both machines makes THRUSH abandon all thought of removing him the instant his usefulness ends. Only U.N.C.L.E has the means of accomplishing that. In utter defeat THRUSH will lose all interest in a pawn that has failed them."

It flashed across Solo's mind that in defeat THRUSH might take a vital interest in a man who might still be capable of rebuilding a destroyed Frankenstein monster. But he saw no reason for calling that to her attention.

TWELVE

THE DEATH-RAY MONSTER

A STIFF WIND had arisen, stirring the palms on both sides of the inner courtyard, hazing the sky with a curtain of' blowing sand. Solo and Illya broke into a run, the long-barreled guns jogging at their hips.

They saw no one until they were two-thirds of the way across the courtyard. Then a shaven-headed giant with a gleaming sword in his hand, his head a mottled blur in the half-light, barred their passage. He had leapt out of the shadows and stood directly in their path, his silken trousers blooming out on both sides of his knees. The trousers and shaven head gave him more the aspect of some huge-statured, evil jinni from the *Arabian Nights* than a Chinese armed guard with a red dragon at his back.

The dragon was made of porcelain, but the huge guard was not. He swung the sword back and forth as if he wished to demonstrate how easy it would

be for him to cut off Solo's head and when neither Solo nor Illya stopped running advanced upon them, still swinging the mammoth sword.

Solo waited until he was very close before he tugged his pistol from its holster, steadied it carefully and drew just as careful a bead on the advancing guard's midsection.

He fired. The pistol leapt in his hand as it roared, and the guard bent double, then went staggering back against the red porcelain dragon and toppled sideways to the sand.

The shot brought two other guards rushing into the courtyard to avenge their fallen comrade. Luckily they were much smaller men, and Illya Kuryakin had no difficulty in disarming the nearest one by ripping his sword from his clasp and burying it to the hilt in the sand. While the sword vibrated like a tuning fork he gripped the still enraged guard by the back of the neck, and brought his forehead down forcibly on the heavy jeweled handle of the sword three times.

The guard crumpled with the groan to the sand and Illya was spared the need of stopping the remaining guard in the same way, for Solo did it with dispatch by bringing the barrel of his pistol into forceful contact with the man's shaven head.

Almost instantly a fourth guard appeared, his naked torso matted with coarse black hair. He was almost as huge as the Jinni-like guard but his features were not of oriental cast. But his nationality did not interest Illya at all. He was only concerned with the length and rapidity of his stride as he advanced and his wise refusal to slash at the air with his sword. The weapon was pointed directly at Illya's chest, and Illya was quite sure that he could not save himself simply by leaping aside.

His hand darted to his hip. But before he could draw and fire another shot rang out a few feet to the left of him. The sword fell from the huge Caucasian's hand and a red gleaming hole appeared on his chest just above his heart. The rage went out of his eyes. He fell to his knees and then forward on his face, a thin ribbon of blood trickling from beneath his right shoulder over the sand.

Illya turned and saw Solo, the still smoking gun in his hand. They encountered no more guards as they passed through the outer courtyard to the desert without slowing down.

They were a hundred feet from the ruin, still running, when a machine-pistol started blasting away at them. Looking back, they could see the small, birdlike figure of Lee Cheng perched on a crumbling ledge of stone high above the outer courtyard, the heavy weapon buckling as he fired.

And something else was standing there, immense and shining and misshapen that resembled a hunch backed giant. It towered at the frail little man's side, and was swaying back and forth, and suddenly as Solo and Kuryakin stared Lee Cheng stopped firing the machine-pistol and moved quickly up behind it.

They saw his hands moving up and down, frantically as if in despair of getting it to stop swaying and then back he leapt to the machine-pistol and started firing again.

"It's his second invention" Solo breathed, gripping Illya by the arm. "Lhasa told me about it—a death-ray machine! He must have mounted it on that ledge, hoping he could get it to work. But he wouldn't be using that machine-pistol if he was really sure of succeeding."

"I know," Illya said, shocked horror in his voice. "She told me about it too. If it does work—"

Tiny geysers of sand arose on the desert almost at their feet, and they could hear the whine of the bullets above the whispering of the wind that was stirring the sand in a less violent way.

Illya Kuryakin had leapt back, his face drained of all color, but Solo did not think it was the bullets that had caused him to break off so abruptly.

For the barest instant the firing stopped again and they saw that Lee Cheng had leapt back behind the giant.

It was Solo who finished what Illya had started to say." If it does work we're done for. Make no mistake about that. But Lhasa didn't know how near he's come to perfecting it. We're almost out of range of the bullets, so if we keep on running we may have a chance—"

They had barely started to turn when it happened.

Lee Cheng had just started to move back toward the machine-pistol when the giant-like shape of metal on the ledge gave a violent lurch sideways and crashed down on top of him.

They could see his frail body flatten beneath the impact of its enormous bulk and flatten still more as it went spinning out over the far end of the ledge, caught in a wedge of flying metal that had broken loose from the metal giant and was contracting like a giant claw.

The giant remained on the ledge for an instant after Lee Cheng started to fall, if some mechanism had been set into motion that was causing it to jerk erratically about. Then it followed its maker over the ledge, falling so rapidly that it struck the sand a hundred feet be low ahead of him, and burst into flames.

Lee Cheng's body thudded to the sand and turned over three times. Each turn brought him nearer to the flames and suddenly he was swallowed up in a roaring inferno that swept across the desert for two hundred feet in both directions, blotting most of the ruins from view.

"That was the last thing—" Illya began, but stopped when he saw the look in Solo's eyes.

"Come on," Solo said, in a voice that was oddly toneless. "We've got to keep moving. Lhasa will have to be taken into custody eventually, but that's not important now. With her fear of THRUSH she'll stay where she is—an isolated survivor with all hope of escape blocked. U.N.C.L.E will have no problem there, if we are lucky enough to succeed in destroying Lee Cheng's electronic giant."

THIRTEEN

THE DESERT TARGET

THE HELICOPTER CAME sweeping down toward them over the desert, descending quite low before it began its hovering vertical descent.

Five minutes later they were in the cockpit, watching the wide waste of sand two hundred feet below vanish in the wake of the plane.

The pilots were both youngsters in their early twenties. But they were good at their job. It was evidenced not only by the assured way they handled the controls, but by the skill and precision of their landing and takeoff and the look of alert appraisal in their eyes as they gazed out across the miles of desert that separated the crumbling ruin from a target marked now for total destruction.

Quick and total destruction— nothing else would do. An immobilized giant of metal and glass with the lightning at its fingertips could, at any moment, be aroused from its mechanical slumber.

In London, Paris, Tokyo more than one THRUSH finger might be capable of reactivating by remote control the complex stimulus-response circuits which had enabled the gigantic mechanism to both eavesdrop and bring a plane down in flames. If the giant could be saved from destruction there was nothing to prevent THRUSH from mastering all of those complexities eliminating every flaw in its functioning.

There was a strained uneasiness in Solo's voice when he spoke to the tight-lipped young pilot. "A few miles at the most now," he said. "Keep a sharp lookout for a sudden rise in the sand. We could be over it so fast we'd just catch the glint of sunlight on metal."

"We can always circle around and go back," the pilot said. "But I doubt if we'll miss it."

The grim possibility that it might be the 'copter which would be missing before its target swept into view flashed across Solo's mind. But he dismissed it.

That all four men shared the mounting tension became apparent when the pilot sitting next to Illya Kuryakin said something that was totally irrelevant.

"The Sahara can't hold a candle to the Gobi as a trouble spot this time of year. The sandstorms are blinding and can rip you apart or bury you easily in less than ten minutes."

"I should think giant-size deserts would be about the same in that respect," Solo said, to keep his own tension from rising. "But the Gobi is special in other ways, as it didn't take us long to discover."

"Anything that THRUSH takes an interest in is likely to be special," the pilot next to Solo said.

It was then that they saw it. It lay sprawled out in a hundred foot hollow in the sand, glittering and immense and startlingly manlike, with a great bulbous head encased in a web of metal beneath which colored lights were blinking on and off. Its arms were segmented, its legs cylindrical.

Solo could see at a glance why in his first glimpse of it its resemblance to a Chinese fire demon had been so pronounced. To an unbelievably complex assemblage of scientific mechanisms Lee Cheng had attached ornamental embellishments which were unmistakably far Eastern in motif, perhaps because his ancestral heritage had made it impossible for him to resist an unconscious impulse to mock all Western science while making use of it to achieve his purpose. Or perhaps—and that seemed more likely—he had made the gigantic Frankenstein monster of technology resemble a fire demon to awe any Gobi native who chanced to encounter it.

For an instant, as the 'copter swept over the hollow, there was no movement visible below except the lights blinking on and off. That was startling and unexpected enough, however, and it caused the four men in the cockpit to exchange apprehensive glances.

Their alarm increased when the 'copter circled about and recrossed the hollow at a lower altitude, for by then the giant had begun to stir and raise itself from the sand.

Solo's voice rang out sharply. "The bombs! Circle back once more and drop all-three of them the instant you're over the hollow. Don't try for a hovering position. There isn't time."

The two pilots leaned sharply forward and jerked at the controls. The whirlybird circled about, more widely this time and sank lower, returning toward the hollow with in creasing speed.

It was almost at the hollow's rim when the jolt came, throwing both pilots violently forward and causing the 'copter to sway and vibrate. Illya Kuryakin was hurled to his knees, but Napoleon Solo managed to remain in his seat despite the swaying, by bending instantly backwards and tightening his grip on the metal arms of the chair.

Instantly he realized that he must do more. Lowering himself quickly he succeeded from a kneeling position in getting at the bomb release. The 'copter continued on across the hollow and was directly over the rising giant when three small black eggs dropped from its belly.

It was fifty feet beyond the hollow when the explosions came, in one continuous, deafening roar that lasted for a full minute.

When the din subsided the 'copter was two hundred feet beyond the hollow, much higher in the air and no longer swaying.

Kuryakin had climbed back into his seat, looking a little shaken, and the two pilots were once more in full control.

It was Solo who was the first to speak. "It should take a few minutes for the smoke to clear. We may as well go a little higher before we circle back."

When the 'copter finally returned to go into a hovering position directly above the hollow, they discovered the shattering damage which had taken place.

Hardly anything was left of Lee Cheng's electronic, eavesdropping giant. A few scattered fragments of metal, a splintered breastplate from which all the antenna had been ripped—it was just a hollow shell—and some smoke-blackened tangles of wire were strewn across the hollow at uneven intervals. Almost all of the glass had disappeared. Here and there were a few crystalline lumps that glittered in the harsh, downstreaming sunlight.

Napoleon Solo grunted. "If THRUSH can make anything out of that they're welcome to it. It's a relief to know that we can now talk our heads off without the slightest danger of being over heard. The Gobi may be a trouble spot this time of year. But New York is at its best now—crisp autumn weather, banners unfurled, Fifth Avenue bright with clicking heels."

"Or blondes, brunettes and red heads," Illya Kuryakin said. "Mr. Waverly is going to be very happy, Napoleon, and that's not entirely incidental. Or is it?"

"I guess not entirely," Solo said.

Ten minutes later the whirlybird was winging its way south.